



ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXIII. Published Every Wednesday. *Beadle & Adams, Publishers,* 98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., July 16, 1884. Ten Cents a Copy. \$5.00 a Year. No. 299

THREE OF A KIND.

TIGER DICK, IRON DESPARD, AND THE SPORTIVE SPORT.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF THE "TIGER DICK" AND "PATENT-LEATHER JOE" SERIES, "ALWAYS ON HAND," "A HARD CROWD," "THE GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE," "A MAN OF NERVE," ETC., ETC.



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CHAPTER I. THE CRYPTOGRAM.

THE scene opens in a rude hut in the mountains. The time is midnight. The characters are two men in the rough garb of miners.

One lies snoring lustily in his bunk. The other sits on an inverted powder-keg, with his legs on either side of a barrel which serves as a table, and on which a short end of a candle is stuck in its own grease.

Spread out on the head of the barrel is a dog-eared and thumb-soiled bit of paper. It may originally have been white, but is now the color of time-stained parchment.

On it is roughly traced what has the appearance of a map drawn by an unskilled hand, and beneath this, as rudely executed, are strange-looking characters, which, instead of being separated into groups or words, succeed each other in an unbroken line.

Above this cryptogram is another piece of paper, the rough brown material used to wrap hardware in. On it, arranged in a vertical line, appear copies of the several characters in the original, and opposite these are the letters of the English alphabet, in the straggling script of a man who handles the pick more skillfully than the pen.

Painfully the man pores over the inscription, tracing the lines character by character with his forefinger, referring to the key, and writing with a broad, flat lumberman's pencil on a third piece of paper.

Presently he shows signs of agitation. A strange eagerness seizes him. He trembles violently. A flush overspreads his face and recedes, leaving him ghastly pale. He is overpowered by a sense of dizziness. The pencil slips from his nerveless grasp, and he staggers to his feet with his hands to his head.

"At last! at last!" he mutters, "can it be that the labor of all these years is to be rewarded?"

Almost blindly he gropes his way to the door, steps out into the night, and lets the cool winds fan his throbbing temples.

But the fever in his blood will not let him rest so. He returns and addresses himself again to his task with burning zeal.

These sounds rouse the sleeper. Turning lazily in his bunk, he growls:

"Thunder an' Mars, pard! air ye prowlin' round hyar yit? It's doggone nigh time that you'd gone to roost. Ef you're so fond o' night-hawkin', I'm blowed ef I be!"

The other looked up at the speaker vaguely. His eyes were wild and bloodshot. He looked like a man not far from brain-fever or insanity. "Joe!" he cried, eagerly, "I've struck it at last!"

"Yas, I s'pose so!" was the skeptical answer; "but ef you want to keep out o' bedlam, I reckon it'll stan' ye in hand to turn in now, an' let 'er simmer tell mornin'."

"Sleep! with a gold mine jest under my thumb?" cried the other, excitedly.

"Look a-hyar, Bob, you've been a-singin' that thar song off an' on fur nigh onto four year. I reckon it would 'a' been a friendly turn to 'a' burnt that consarned thing long ago. It'll give ye maggots on the brain yit—ye hyar me!"

"But, Joe, it has all come out as straight as a string! I tell ye I'm the richest man in this hyar mountain range to-day! My God! what I've stood, strainin' my soul-case out o' me over that thing! But now I've got 'em; an' I mean to squeeze 'em fur all they're worth! Ef I don't make that thar old mountain squeel, it's because I don't know how!"

He rose and strode back and forth across the cramped space of the hut.

"Does it make any kind o' sense?" asked Joe, rubbing his head and yawning sleepily.

"I haven't quite finished yet—"

"Exactly!"—with significant emphasis.

"Oh! but as far as I've got it's perfectly straight."

"How fur's that?"

It was plain that Joe was bored rather than interested.

With feverish eagerness Bob read what he had translated.

"You see it is about the map," he said, "and is sensible. Oh! there can be no mistake about it!"

And yet there was so much at stake, and his

brain was so muddled by the protracted strain, that he hung upon the verdict of his partner.

With a wildly-beating heart, he saw Joe's eyes open wider, as if he was beginning to be interested. When he swung his legs out of bed with an oath, there could be no question that he was impressed.

"Waal, I'll be hanged ef that thar don't begin to sound as ef it had the right ring in it!" he exclaimed.

This encouragement was like a heavy weight thrown into one side of a trembling balance. Bob leaped to his feet and raved about the room like a caged beast.

"Rich! rich beyond all countin' of it!" he cried, gesticulating wildly, and laughing in almost maniac glee. "A millionaire, pard! How's that? Bob Cady, the bonanza king! How's that, ole man? Put 'er thar fur ninety days! Ha! ha! ha! How's that, I say?"

And he struck his hand into his partner's with a report like that of a pistol.

By this time Joe had caught the fever. A miner's hopes are like dry prairie grass. The slightest "indications" start visions of fabulous wealth. It is this atmosphere of ever-shifting hope and fear that gives to the life of the gold-hunter its fascination.

Not satisfied with shaking both hands, the men actually embraced each other, and for a time behaved more like a couple of playful imbeciles than anything else.

"But this hyar ain't finishin' that thar arrangement," suggested Joe, who was eager to see the matter put beyond a peradventure. "Mebby we're shoutin' before we're out o' the woods. Better clinch it before the bottom falls out."

As if seized with a fear that there might still be a chance of such a miscarriage, Bob all atremble plunged again into the work, while Joe watched him trace letter by letter, too much absorbed to notice that his legs were getting decidedly chilled.

At last the translation was complete, and there could be no doubt as to its correctness.

Bob rose, swaying dizzily.

"Let me git another sniff of air," he said. "It's queer how it takes the tuck out of a man. I'm wringin' wet with sweat, and ye could knock me down with a feather!"

He went to the door, while his partner pored over the map and the key to its meaning.

As the latter read, he saw that the cryptogram was indeed deciphered. Latitude and longitude, landmarks and distances, were all clearly and consistently made out.

Then they went to castle-building.

But in the midst of it all Bob's manner suddenly underwent a marked change, caused by the general tenor of Joe's plans rather than by anything in particular that he said.

"Look a-hyar, Joe," he said, his eyes contracting warily, "I reckon we'd ought to settle how the plunder is to be divided. There's goin' to be a doggone heap of it, ye understand."

"Of course," was Joe's ready assent. "The more the merrier! Ye can't turn my stomach in that way!"

"But which goes to who, an' who claps onto which?" persisted Bob.

"That thar's a mighty easy sum," said Joe, dissembling the uneasiness he began to feel at his partner's manner. "It's a share an' share alike—pards up an' pards down, o' course. That makes easy reckonin'."

"Yaas, that thar is all right as fur as it goes," said Bob, doggedly, "ef this hyar was an ordinary case—which it ain't, not by a doggone sight!"

"What's the matter with it?"

"Waal, ye see, when two goes a prospectin', it's squar' all round. They both puts the same resk an' trouble into the thing, an' natterally expects to git the same out of it. But this hyar is different."

"As how?"

"Waal, this hyar was a dead-sure thing as soon as the blind was worked out; an' then, the map wa'n't yourn in the fust place, an' you haven't been pullin' eye-teeth over it fur four years back."

Joe remained silent. The facts were indisputable, but he did not relish the conclusion his partner had drawn from them.

"O' course," pursued Bob, growing more positive as he found that he did not meet with opposition, "that ought to make a difference. Now, Bob Cady ain't the man to drive a hard bargain with a pard. I'll tell ye what strikes me as about the fair thing. It's dollar fur dollar, up to a cool half-million apiece. Then, ef you want to see to the runnin' o' the thing, you kin go in on a better salary than any mine-superintendent either east or west of the divide. What do you say to that?"

"An' what are you supposed to be doin' meanwhile?" asked Joe, before consenting to commit himself.

"Waal," said Bob airily, as became a millionaire, "I allow I'm makin' purty tall tracks fur my gal, Betty. Betty she'd like to take in Paris, an' France, an' all them furrin countries—especially Paris; fur she was always great on the Eyetalians; was Betty, ever sence Mrs. Judge Rountree come back from Europe an'

chinned it so thunderin' big about the sights she had seen over thar among the frog-eaters an' Eyetalians, jest as if she was used to it all her life. So Betty always said she would like to go jest onc't, to take her down in her brag. An' now, by thunder! thar's jest whar she's a-goin' fur to go, an' ye may bet yer life on it! But fur my part, I reckon ef you'd jest p'int me the way to ole Bunker Hill, I'd be about ready to set right down an' go to housekeepin' whar ye could see the monniment from the settin'-room winder. I allow that thar would be about as nigh Heaven on earth as mortal man often gits!"

He was so absorbed in the picture his fancy drew that he did not notice the change his companion was undergoing.

The demon of avarice was at work in his heart; his eyes glittered, and his breath came spasmodically.

On a sudden, without warning, he sprang upon his partner like a madman.

Taken unawares, Bob was borne to the floor.

"Good God! what's the matter, Joe?" he cried, struggling wholly on the defensive—only endeavoring to keep the hand that clutched his throat from strangling him.

Like a bulldog, Joe fought in perfect silence. His purpose of murder was beyond question.

Bob caught the flash of steel in the candle-light, and felt a horrible, sickening sense as it sunk into his flesh. Then a frenzy of terror spurred him to superhuman effort, and, weakened as he was, he writhed out of the grasp of the murderer and sprang to his feet.

Joe too arose, and made a clutch at the cryptogram and its key.

Then the truth flashed upon the man who had wasted his life energies in its solution until he was brought nearly to death's door.

In that moment to be so robbed was worse than death. There centered the hopes of those weary years—the chance of reunion with the woman of his heart, bringing her the gold that would transform her life from toil and privation to luxury—all that this world has to offer.

He too sprang for the open-sesame of this dream of delight.

Their hands closed on the papers and on one another with a grip of iron.

The barrel was overturned and the candle extinguished. The precious papers were torn until it was possible that they would be of no further use to any one; and so the secret which had cost so many years' labor and was now the occasion of the basest treachery might be irrecoverably lost.

Each gained possession of some fragments without knowing whether they would prove of any value. But the spirit which animated them now was to gain all or destroy all.

The murderer, his evil passions once roused, had the rapacity of a wild beast.

Bob Cady, feeling that his life was lost, resolved that his faithless partner should not profit by those years of uncheered toil.

So in the rayless darkness of the hut the struggle was continued, the dull thud of tossing limbs, the grating of teeth, heavy breathing and groans, making it a prison house of nameless horrors.

At last the door burst open, and one rushed forth, fleeing madly for life.

His face was covered with blood, his hair tumbled in disorder, his clothes torn and sodden with sickening, viscous ooze. In one hand he clutched some bits of crumpled paper, in the other a reeking bowie.

Madly he fled through the night, with but one thought—to escape the pursuing fury; and ever at his heels followed the murderer, with his bowie also reeking with blood, while he tugged at a revolver which had become tangled in the belt that he had snatched from the head of his bunk.

In addition to this, Joe Moran had stopped only to thrust his feet into his boots. In the struggle his shirt had been torn so that it now fluttered in tatters from neck and wristbands.

But nothing could stay his murderous purpose. With the ferocity of a hound he hung upon the track of his intended victim.

Both gasped with exhaustion; both staggered with loss of blood; so neither had any decided advantage in that desperate race. But at last the revolver settled it. He in advance fell upon his face with a groan; and the triumphant murderer sprang upon his victim with a savage snarl of exultation.

His forehead came in contact with the cold muzzle of a revolver, extended in the darkness by an unseen hand!

CHAPTER II.

AN INVADEN PARADISE.

AN evening train thundered into the depot at San Francisco.

From its sides poured streams of alighting passengers, like bees issuing from a hive. Then followed the usual glad greetings, the sweet, low laughter of women sending threads of music through the hubbub of escaping steam, rumbling baggage—trucks, and shouting cab-drivers.

The passenger in whom we are specially interested saw no anxious face burst into a joyous

smile of welcome at his approach; yet he looked on the more fortunate without envy.

Indeed one might have fancied something like good-natured pity in his glance. It was as if he asked himself—"What are these ordinary mortals and their every-day happiness to that to which I am going?"

With his heart swelling with exultant anticipation, which gave to his grave face a softness that was yet not quite a smile, he gripped his traveling-bag more firmly, and quickened his pace into a long, swinging stride that at once suggested the soldier.

His dress furthered this idea. His hat had a cord and tassels in place of the band usually worn by civilians; and a sort of military cloak depended from his square shoulders.

His features were cast in an aristocratic mold. His complexion was dark almost to swarthy. A long, thin mustache, jet-black, drooped on either side of his mouth. Well apart, beneath almost straight brows, were set a pair of eyes that were hawk-like in their intense brilliancy.

One instinctively thought of the typical fire-eater of Southern chivalry.

By his reckless defiance of danger this man had become known throughout the mining regions of the wild West as Iron Despard, while one terrible episode of his adventurous life had won him the sobriquet of Despard the Duelist.*

But the bitterness of soul which had made him seek places where his hand would be against every man and every man's hand against him, had been sweetened by the infusion of woman's love;† and under its humanizing influence the whole man seemed to have been transformed.

Less than a year had he enjoyed such happiness as comes to few men—scarcely long enough for him to feel quite sure of its reality and permanence. He often found himself shaken by a fierce suspicion of fate, as if it were possible that he might yet awake to find it all a tantalizing dream.

This was when he was away from the woman who had so changed all the currents of his being, leading their troubled waters through scenes of peace.

Then in almost wild trepidation he would rush to her, to hold her face between his hands and gaze into her eyes as if he sought to read her soul, while his own was shrouded by a sadness so profound that it made her heart ache.

She understood those moods, and with her warm arms wound about his neck would gaze back steadfastly into his eyes, smiling reassuringly, until the demon of doubt was stilled, and he bowed his face upon hers and kissed her again and again and yet again.

Then came wild transports of delight, which she soothed, until he rested calmly by her side, only holding her hand.

But to day he was going to her with his heart bounding joyously. No uncertainty marred the pleasure with which he looked forward to the glad surprise that awaited him when he should make his appearance before her all unexpected.

He had gone to Monterey on business which was to have detained him two days; but an unexpected event had enabled him to dispatch it in one; so now he was hurrying back to her who had become so necessary to him that he grudged every moment away from her side.

Set on her cluster of hills, San Francisco has suburbs where cottages like doll-houses are perched on all sorts of picturesque bluffs and acclivities, so that you often have to ascend to their front doors by a flight of wooden steps which bring you on a line with the chimney-tops of the next neighbor down the hill, while the one above finds your roof no obstruction to his airy prospect.

To such a spot was Iron Despard borne on springy tread.

As he mounted the hill, leaving the city and its twinkling lights below him, he saw above a cottage with a multiplicity of gable-ends ornamented with scroll-work and pendants, and bay windows here and there, and balconies overhanging the jutting rock on which it was set.

A dim light burned in the parlor, and a brighter one in the room just across the hall. As is not infrequently the case, before increasing wealth has transformed a home into a "residence," with drawing and reception rooms, and libraries and boudoirs, this one chamber was used as a sleeping apartment and sitting and sewing room, its location on the ground floor making it equally available for the several purposes.

It was but the beginning of a home which he was building up by honest toil. That nothing to which any reproach could possibly attach should mar its purity, he had abandoned the gambling table, where his superior skill would have enabled him to live luxuriously, and confined himself to legitimate business. And she, who in the wild, reckless life of the mining-camp had been known as Belle the Beautiful, now delighted to show him how charming a housewife she could be—for love of him!

So they had set up their household gods in

this little nest of a place; and instead of a servant living in the house, she had a woman who came to help her with the heaviest part of her work, and turned the rest into play with such a witching grace that she won her grave-faced husband to smiles which had a touch of pathos running through their amusement.

When leaving home he had urged her to have this woman come and stay with her through the night of his absence; but she had gayly asked him if he thought her such a coward.

"And then, you know," she had added, archly, "the good creature, while entertaining me with her multitude of aches and pains, and the sorrows she sees through that drunken wretch of a husband of hers, would divert my thoughts from my better behaved lord and master! As much as I sympathize with her, I couldn't afford that, could I? I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll sit here all by myself, and imagine that you are away to the club—how I'll club you, if you ever so desert me!—and I'll try to cry just as hard as I can!"

At that she burst into a merry laugh, and had caught him by the ends of his mustache and kissed him, and then thrown her arms about him and hugged him to her and hidden her face in his breast, whence he had lifted it to find her eyes sparkling through tears.

Now he had hoped that she had taken her own sweet will, and that he would find her alone, with no one to mar the happiness of their blissful isolation from the world.

He wished to get into the house and stand where he could look at her without her being aware of his presence. Then he would call her softly and see her start, at first of apprehension, then her quick cry of delight, and the swift rush into his arms!

If he ascended to the front entrance she would hear him at the door; for he could see the light streaming from her room into the hall. But by going round the house he could get upon the veranda, and effect an entrance through a glass door at the back of the parlor. This would be far enough away so that the soft turning of the key would not break into her reverie.

Noiselessly he opened, passed through, and closed the gate; then keeping on the grass, he made his way round to the back of the house; here he tiptoed across the veranda, opened the glass door, and glided into the parlor, all without accident.

But once in the room, he stood rooted to the spot, his heart stilled in its beating, his brain on fire, and his extremities like ice! Open-mouthed and wide-eyed he stood in the darkness, with hell pouring into his soul through his ears.

In his wife's chamber he heard the deep base voice of a man!

He had no thought of any explanation which would exonerate her from blame. He had suffered so at the hands of a woman that the thought that he was to be once more the victim of treachery—here where he had given his heart and his confidence as never before—goaded him to madness.

For the time he was turned into a wild beast.

"Curse her! curse her!" surged through his brain like liquid fire. "It was for this that she objected to the attendance of a servant! That her thoughts of me might not be interrupted!"

At that evidence of meditated treachery a howl of fury nearly choked him as he struggled to suppress it.

But he wanted verbal evidence first.

He soon got it—or what appeared to be such.

"Love me!" growled the man, in a surly, sneering tone. "A heap your love amounts to!"

"Have I not given you every evidence of the fact?" replied Mrs. Dangerfield, not angrily, but in heart-broken tones. "Would you be here if I did not?"

Could more be wanted than that?

With a roar of fury, Iron Despard sprang forward, crying:

"If he is not satisfied of your constancy, madam, I am!"

As he came within the bar of light that streamed into the parlor, he could see across the hall into his wife's room.

If the evidence of his ears needed the confirmation of sight, he had that too.

There sat the intruder into his desecrated paradise—while his wife stood before him in tears, wringing her hands.

At the sound of the infuriated husband's voice, the man started up with an oath.

The wife uttered a shriek, and sprang before her companion, extending her arms. It was plain that her first thought was for his safety. She interposed her breast between him and her husband's revolver.

She was not mistaken in anticipating this deadly resort.

"Stop! It is—"

But the words were frozen on her lips.

She saw the deadly hatred in his ghastly face. She saw his right hand leap upward, bearing a cocked revolver, until it seemed as if she was looking straight down the black bore. She thought he was menacing her life.

Her thought then was not of herself—of the violent death that would quench her spark of life like the snuffing out of a candle. It was only:

"When he learns the truth!"

She saw a quick flash, a puff of white smoke; then, while the room rung with the sharp report, heard a savage cry and a heavy fall behind her.

She whose life had been passed amid scenes of murderous violence could interpret those sounds only too well!

She knew that death had passed her and found him whom she had sought to protect.

She uttered no word, no sound. She turned half round. She gazed upon a man writhing in agony and bleeding from a wound in the breast.

She threw herself on the body, and so lay unconscious.

This was too much. The husband sprang into the room, seized her like a beast of prey, and tearing her from the body, fairly hurled her across the room.

Then the madman followed her with his drawn bowie.

She lay upon her back with her fair white bosom exposed.

Frenzied with jealousy, he saw the fact, but did not recognize that it was his own work—that his savage clutch had nearly torn her dress off from her.

Kneeling beside her, he raised the glittering knife, to plunge its keen point into that thing of flawless beauty.

But he remembered how often he had laid his head upon it, when her arms closed about him, holding him close, and her warm cheek, laid against his in mute tenderness, soothed his troubled soul to quietness; and his heart failed him.

"No! no! I cannot!" he cried, drawing his arm across his eyes, to dash away the hot tears that blinded him.

Then he sprang up and rushed from the house.

He knew that he could not go where men would see his ghastly face and wild mien. Any one would be justified in detaining him as a madman or an escaping criminal.

But it was not necessary for him to leave the city as he had just entered it, by train. He had a horse in a stable at the lower end of the yard. This he quickly saddled, and mounting, dashed away.

He had all that wild country before him. Once more he was alone in the world, with his hand against every man and every man's hand against him.

And so he fled the wreck of his brief happiness.

What he sought was the maddest excitement that the lawless life of the border could give. Let there be blood in it, and human anguish! Let his soul riot in deeds of violence and wrong! Justice!—mercy! He laughed them to scorn! What justice or mercy had been shown him? Had not all the world wronged him? And it had been so from the first! What a sodden dolt had he been to trust in that fool's paradise! He hated all living things—all men, and especially all women!

Wherever he went his stony face, the smoldering fire of his glance, the almost savage superciliousness of his bearing, drew the eye of fear after him. Every one felt that he was a dangerous man to have anything to do with. Even his friendship would be very much like a can of dynamite.

Thus he found no companionship. He commanded men, and for a time took a fierce delight in it. But the role of a tyrant was not congenial to him, and its isolation sometimes weighed upon him like the ostracism of Cain.

The night was his peculiar season of torture. Then sleep fled his pillow, and some such frenzy as haunted Saul of old drove him out to wander the mountain solitudes and wrestle with his despair.

Thus on one occasion he found himself far from any habitation, when his bitter reverie was broken in upon by the sound of flying feet.

The night was so dark that he could hardly distinguish his hand before his face; but his practiced ear easily interpreted the approaching sounds.

They were such as would be made by two men racing at the top of their speed.

Such a fact at such a time could have but one meaning. They must be a fugitive and his pursuer.

Like an old war-horse when he snuffs the smoke of battle, Iron Despard felt his blood tingle through his veins. This was the first onset of that red tide in which he had once before steeped his burning heart. He could have shouted in savage welcome, so fiercely did his soul bound to meet it.

The old-time readiness came back like an un-forgotten instinct.

He could detect an unevenness in the gait of the runners which showed that their strength was well-nigh spent. As they drew nearer, he could distinguish the labored breathing of one, which came in moaning gasps.

He, then, was the pursued. How ghastly must be his pain-drawn and terror-distorted

* See Half-Dime Library, 219.

† See Dime Library, 251.

face! How must his protruding eyes glare, his tongue loll, his body reel, as he staggered on without hope!

And that other, the pursuer! He, the murderer! The hungry glitter of his eyes, the set teeth, the braced muscles, the fiercely-clutched bowie or revolver!

All these were hidden by the darkness; but Iron Despard needed not the light to disclose them to him. His well-instructed fancy painted them with photographic faithfulness, and he gloated over the picture with ghoulish relish.

He would not interfere with this devilment—not he! Let the bloody struggle that had desolated the world ever since its creation go on! Had not he had his share in its pain? Every man for himself, and Satan take the hindmost!

Grating his teeth in this savage mood, he stepped behind a boulder and waited to let the chase pass by him.

They were at hand, the pursuer close upon his victim.

Then came a ringing report, and the one in advance fell headlong at the feet of the man in ambush.

With an exultant oath the other sprung upon him.

But now came a change in Iron Despard's purpose. He knew nothing and cared nothing for the merits of this quarrel. But the same tigerish bitterness that had prompted him to refuse succor to the fleeing wretch, now suggested that he rob the murderer of his triumph. He could balk the one without helping the other, and so add to the sum of pain in the world.

He had but to reach forth his hand, to thrust the cold muzzle of his revolver against the forehead of the bird of prey he wished to scare off.

He did so without a word.

Joe Moran recognized its touch with an icy thrill that tingled through every nerve in his body.

With a shriek of terror he leaped away and fled through the night.

He knew that it was not held by the partner whom he had so miserably betrayed. Whose hand, then, had extended it in the darkness? His superstitious fears furnished him with an answer that curdled the blood in his veins!

He fled, nor stopped until he had rushed into the hut which had been their joint home, and secured the door behind him.

There he cowered in the darkness, waiting for some supernatural vengeance to be wreaked upon his base treachery.

CHAPTER III.

A "CORNER" IN ERIE.

HEY! presto change! and we are across the continent.

Passing out of Broadway down Wall street, we ascend the steps of a massive building, to be greeted the moment we enter its doorway by an unintelligible Babel of voices, like the ceaseless roar of a human Niagara.

An officer in gray points us up a long flight of stairs, we enter the first door to the right, and look down on the restless sea of humanity below from the visitor's gallery of the New York Stock Exchange.

The scene can be fitly compared to nothing short of a mad-house or a den of wild beasts.

As pale and wild-eyed as if engaged in the frantic struggle for life, a surging mob of human beings, all pressing toward a common center and shrieking the unintelligible jargon of "Change," interweaves like a swarm of bees.

Here one, half-climbing upon those immediately in front of him in his frenzied eagerness to attract the attention of some one on the other side of the swirling maelstrom, gesticulating wildly with both hands, in one of which he holds a small memorandum-book and pencil, and straining his voice to the highest pitch, until his face is empurpled and the veins stand out in his neck like whipcords, has his hat knocked over his eyes by a competitor, who under the mask of sportiveness endeavors to create a diversion which shall take thousands of dollars out of one man's pocket and put them into another's.

For an instant all business is suspended for a laugh which is the sorriest mockery of merriment at this trick, which would be boyish but for its possible consequences; but it is only a grimace which fades as abruptly as it comes, leaving again that look of strained anxiety; and the mad struggle for the audience is renewed more fiercely than ever.

Meanwhile the facetious broker has taken advantage of a surge in the crowd to glide into the very center of the vortex, where he outvies the maddest of the madmen, though his laughing face presents a marked contrast to the general look of desperation.

At the side of the room, where a little apartment is inclosed in walnut and glass, that the ceaseless click of the telegraph may not be drowned by the roar of the outer Babel, an attendant in gray, with gilt letters on the band of his cap, steps into the seat of a leather-bottomed chair, and thus elevated above the crowd, searches among the waving arms and moving hats for a desired face, signaling the while with his hand.

He is presently espied by the broker whom we have specialized.

Their eyes meet. The messenger jumps down. The speculator shoulders his way out of the crowd. A sealed envelope passes between them, to be clutched by the receiver as if it were bread held out to a starving man.

A lightning glance makes him master of the half-dozen words scrawled on the telegraphic form in a running hand.

With incredible rapidity he indites a reply, so nearly a mere wriggling line, with a dot here and a dash there, that it is intelligible only to a trained eye; and thrusting it through the little window with a spurt of words that it takes a quick ear to interpret, he plunges back into the throng.

More fiercely than ever he shouts and gesticulates and scribbles in his memorandum-book, using all the tactics of which perfect self-control and a knowledge of human nature give him command.

Now he looks as if his whole soul hung upon the attainment of his object. Now he raises a laugh at some transaction which may nevertheless be a very advantageous one for the bidder ridiculed. Now he shakes his book tauntingly in the face of a hesitating operator. Now he whistles, looking about with indifferent amusement. Now he shouts, perhaps only to drown the voice of some one near him.

And this is Edward Haveland—a man who, coming from the Pacific Slope with no one knows how much—nor indeed how little!—money, has from the very start taken a commanding position in the greatest mart on the continent.

All admire him; most fear him a little; a few—to whom he has applied the thumb-screws—hate him.

Nevertheless he is universally courted. Men take him cordially by the hand; women lavish their sweetest smiles and most subtle flatteries on him. Why? Because it is said that no one can predict where such a man will end his career. He may live to outshine the Goulds and Vanderbilts of finance.

He has the readiness of resource, the promptness, the nerve that makes a successful gambler, whether the event hang upon the fluctuation of stocks or a "turn" in faro.

At last comes the signal which ends this mad strife. The wild shouting subsides. The crowd loses its coherence, gathers into knots, and thins out.

Most of the men now look haggard and worn; many wild-eyed and desperate. Some are genuinely jubilant. They are the lucky ones.

But no one is so full of gayety as Edward Haveland. He slaps this one on the back, aims a paper dart at that one, and has a quip of badinage for all.

Men look at him enviously or suspiciously, according to their way of taking the awards of fate. They feel that, in the "corner" that promises to ruin a score of them and "sing" a great many more; he has added a naught or two to the debit side of his bank account.

He dines at a fashionable club fronting on Fifth Avenue, lolls a half-hour over billiards, glances as listlessly through the afternoon papers, and chats the current gossip—financial, political, and social—while idly watching the passers-by on the street. In the evening he occupies a box at Niblo's, in company with several gentlemen whose only business in life seems to be the pursuit of pleasure. After the grand ballet they go behind the scenes in a body, to find entertainment in the coquetties of the scantily dressed queens of the gauze wings and tinsel scepter. Later they ascend the steps of a brown-stone palace on one of the cross-streets leading off from Broadway above Madison Square.

Here their "occupation" of the day, taking a slightly different form, becomes an "amusement," and Edward Haveland is "clawed by the tiger" with a nonchalance that wins the envy of men who flush and pale as their "chips" ebb and flow.

At midnight he parts company with them with a gay jest. A brisk walk of a couple of squares takes him to a residence as pretentious as the house he has just left. He runs lightly up the steps, lets himself in with a latch-key, and stands in the dimly-lighted lobby.

Then the mask drops, and the man is gray with a despair that words are poor to express!

With feet that seem shod with lead, he climbs the thickly-carpeted stair, and enters a dressing-room evidently furnished for a gentleman's accommodation.

A dim light burns here, as in the hall. A door leading into the adjoining apartment stands ajar; and there also is the faint illumination of a mere point of gas.

He listens with strained attention. In the dead silence of the night a soft, rhythmic aspiration is just audible from within.

He goes to the door and closes it gently, without looking through the aperture. Then he throws himself into a chair, and resting his elbows on his knees, takes his head between his hands, with his fingers thrust into his hair.

In this attitude he sits, with his face as hard

and stern as if graven in stone, his eyes staring into vacancy.

What his thoughts are we may judge by his after action.

He rises, goes to his dressing-table, pulls out a drawer, and takes therefrom a highly finished revolver.

With this in his hand he relapses into that stony reverie.

There is no braggadocio about this man. One feels that his life hangs in the balance.

Whatever the motives that influence his decision, it is plain that cowardice has no place among them, when he says softly to himself:

"No! no! not that way!"

His eyes soften. Sadness, tenderness, regret, take the place of that fierce recklessness.

He returns the revolver to its place, sits down at the table, and draws writing materials toward him.

There is a long interval before he begins to write; and when he does it is as if every pen-stroke cost him a twinge of anguish.

The pages are scrawled and blotted. He folds them up without reading them over.

Then, as if he had passed a goal after which there must be no faint-hearted looking back, he rose, huddled without order a few indispensable toilet articles into a bag, and changed for a traveling suit the evening dress he had donned at his club.

Now came the most terrible ordeal of all. A clammy ooze appeared on his forehead, and his eyes became wild again.

Without stopping to think, he opened the door leading into the next apartment, and passed through, the thick carpet effectually muffling his tread.

He entered an elegantly furnished sleeping apartment where nothing that money and taste could supply for its adornment was wanting.

In the bed lay a woman with one hand jealously holding the silken counterpane about a baby which she hugged to her bosom even in sleep.

Her fresh young beauty had been crowned with a tender matronly grace that added reverence to the admiration of the beholder.

The man crept to the bedside and gazed down upon these things of loveliness that heaven had given into his keeping. How had he quitted himself of his stewardship?

A crystalline tear pendent on the long lashes of the woman might be taken as an answer to that question.

The man stood with folded arms and gazed at it, and the lines between his eyes deepened, and his mouth hardened with bitterness.

His eyes, which had been bloodshot before, now became humid; but the sob that shook his breast was close locked behind his white lips.

He could not bear this long. He bent over the sleepers, and touched his lips to the cheek of the child; but he dared not kiss the mother, lest he wake her.

He turned away, hesitated, went back, bent once more, lifted the soft, silken hair that jealously hid one bare shoulder, and left a kiss and a tear upon it.

Then he fled as one who dared not look back, lest his resolution should fail him.

A moment later he was out in the street again, and entering a car, sat in a corner with his hat drawn down over his eyes and his coat-collar drawn up, but not so as to entirely hide the ghastly pallor of his face.

The conductor who took his fare looked at him curiously; the sleepy ticket-agent roused himself sufficiently to glance a second time at the man to whom he sold a ticket to Denver.

"Looks as if he had his pockets full of somebody else's money!" he reflected.

But of course it was "none of his funeral."

The conductor of the Pullman sleeping-car eyed him, and made up his mind that he would keep on the lookout for an officer with a telegram descriptive of another of New York's absconders.

But he reached his destination without detection, and there dropped the habiliments of civilization, and donned the rough garb of the frontiersman.

Arrayed in a slouch hat, woolen shirt, and trousers tucked into heavy top-boots, with revolver and bowie strapped to his waist, and mounted on a strong horse, he was hardly recognizable as the dilettante gentleman of the Stock Exchange.

Across the palm of his left hand he traced the word "ALWAYS", so that it showed red in the daylight, and glowed with a phosphorescent luminosity in the darkness.

Now his manner underwent a marked change. Thus far he had been moody; but with the assumption of the externals of a new character, he affected a reckless, devil-may-care gayety. One who did not know him would have thought that he knew nothing, cared for nothing beyond the happy-go-lucky recklessness of his daily life.

But beneath all was a gnawing remorse, and over all a steadfast purpose which made his

* See Dime Library, No. 54, entitled "Always on Hand; or, The Sportive Sport of the Foot-hills."

real life something very different from what it appeared on the surface.

In a new country faces change rapidly; but all along the line on his way south toward Santa Fe he found men who greeted him with a hearty welcome which involved a great deal of "settin' 'em up." Old times had to be talked over, and the new sensations duly shown.

In the rushing little camp of Coyote the sensation was the "Golden Serpent," and thither was he conducted in time for an adventure which was to be one of the turning-points of his life.

Let us see what was going forward there.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GOLDEN SERPENT.

It was the "shank of the evening," and everything was lovely.

The boys were "crooking their elbows thirteen to the dozen." Therefore, of course, Billy Bowlegs was smiling his blandest, as he dispensed the drinks that allayed their thirst.

Just then a man who could not be mistaken for one of that crowd entered the saloon, strode across the room, and threw himself into a seat in the corner.

He was ghastly pale, with the pallor which comes of protracted dissipation. There were dark circles around his eyes, which glittered as if he were on the verge of delirium tremens.

And yet there was that about him which commanded respect. He was no ordinary toper. It was not necessary that his dress should be finer and more cleanly than that of the men among whom he had come to assign him to a higher rank. His face and bearing were of an entirely different kind.

In the one was intellect, about the other that easy grace which marks one born to command.

"What kin I do fur you to-night, boss?" asked Billy Bowlegs.

"Brandy!" was the laconic answer.

The stranger did not take the trouble to look up. He was ignorant of, or quite indifferent to, the fact that all eyes were fixed upon him. He gazed at the center of the table before him with a settled frown.

"Make it two, my Christian friend."

Billy Bowlegs wheeled round with a start of surprise.

He confronted in the speaker a gentleman rather below the medium stature, and emaciated, as with excesses begun before he had got his growth.

Of his dress it is not too much to say that he was "got up regardless." He wore a "biled" shirt with standing collar, and a neckcloth of gaudy pattern, the predominating color of which was red, from the midst of which glittered a diamond that made up in size what it probably lacked in quality.

His vest, cut low, rivaled his neckcloth in texture, pattern and colors. Over it was worn a sack coat of dark purple velvet, very scant as to skirts, but with a remarkable spread of lapels. It was faced with satin and bound with braid full an inch wide. From the breast-pocket protruded the corner of a crimson silk handkerchief.

The coat hung open, so as not to hide an immense chain, ostensibly gold, which went round his neck and disappeared in his vest pocket. Let us hope that his watch was not "at his uncle's."

His trousers were of the "loudest" pattern of green plaid, baggy in the legs, but fitting snugly about patent leather boots, long and narrow, with box-toes and high French heels.

Add a bell-crowned silk hat, a bamboo cane with an ivory head representing a bull-pup, the fact that his left hand was incased in a kid glove and held its fellow looped over the middle finger as a showman holds his folded bank-notes, while his bare right displayed a seal ring that covered the first joint of the little finger, the nail of which, carefully trimmed and scrupulously clean, was full half an inch long—wax his mustache and goatee, and twist them to needle-points at the ends, and let his oily locks exhale the odor of the barber-shop so dear to men of his class; and you have this dainty gentleman as large as life!

"What! Dick, me boy!" he cried, as he presented himself before Billy Bowlegs's patron.

The man thus familiarly addressed looked up, not with a start of surprise, but with the cool deliberation of one who never let himself betray any unguarded emotion.

The little dandy threw back the lapels of his coat, thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest, and striking an agonizing attitude, waited with smiling expectancy to be recognized—and, of course, admired.

He received only a cold scrutiny from under knit brows.

He was nothing abashed.

"Eh! You don't know me in this cut?"

And rising lightly on one toe, he whirled round so as to display his "stunning" toilet from all points.

"Never mind; I have one unfailing mark of identity. When you see me drink—"

But he broke off, and coolly seated himself opposite his host by his own appointment.

"Your adamant cheek is a sufficient iden-

tifier, Jim," said the other, without waiting to see him drink. "It would be impossible that such brazen genius should make its appearance in two men in the same century."

"Hal! hal! me noble juke; put 'er thar!"

And Shadow Jim thrust forward his hand to be clasped by his old patron, Tiger Dick.*

"You seem to be flourishing," observed the Tiger.

"As a green bay tree!" responded Jim, throwing himself back in his chair, quite oblivious to the grin that appeared on the faces of the spectators. "But you, me Christian friend! Gads! you look like a death's head!"

A bitter smile flitted across Tiger Dick's face, and a lurid light flared in his eyes for a moment.

"We can't all take the pot on the same hand," he said.

And at this moment he received the fiery liquor from Billy Bowlegs.

"Philosophy! philosophy!" said Shadow Jim, with a careless elevation of the eyebrows.

"Ah!" as he lifted his glass from the table and held it up to the light, "the universal consoler! Our solid friend in adversity, and our boon companion in joy! Pardon an unmanly tear!—I never look upon the wine when it is red without a throb of grateful emotion. Ah—um!"

And throwing back his head as he tipped the glass at his lips, he closed his eyes, and seemed to swoon off into dreamy bliss as the fiery liquid trickled down his throat.

"By thunder!" muttered a burly miner, whose mouth watered as he watched this exhibition, "I'd give half my find ef I could git outside of bug-juice with sich a relish as that!"

"Thanks, Father Bacchus!" said Jim, as he set down his empty glass with a sigh.

Then his eye fell upon the glass of water which had accompanied it; and turning to Billy Bowlegs, who stood staring at him open-mouthed, he said solemnly, and waving it off as a thing offensive to his sight:

"Take it away, friend; and in the future never expose such a shock to a stranger to whom you owe no grudge!"

"I'm beggin' yer parding, boss!" said Billy.

"I didn't drop to your make o' man."

And humoring his patron, he took up the offending glass, and retired backward, bowing in mock apology.

"This seems to be a very polite community," observed Jim, looking about on the men with a show of curiosity.

His insolence was so cool that every one felt amused instead of offended.

Then he turned again to Tiger Dick.

"But, old man, it takes the heart out of me—I swear it does—to see you so broken up. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Let us talk about something else," said Tiger Dick, impatiently. "You ought to be enough interested in the subject to make some account of yourself diverting."

"On! meself?" replied Shadow Jim, smiling complacently. "Well, you know that my two most characteristic weaknesses are antipathy to the police and fondness for the ladies. I have been signally fortunate in both particulars. Would you believe it?—I have yet to learn what the inside of a court-room looks like!"

"You have always shown a remarkable celerity in sliding out—"

"When the guardians of public morals manifested a friendly interest? Ha! ha! ha! Haven't I? Well, since I last took an informal leave of you, under the stress of circumstances, I have been more coy than ever. Like the Irishman's flea, when they put their fingers on me, I have invariably proved elsewhere. But the ladies—ah! the ladies!"

And Shadow Jim crossed his hands over his breast, canted his head on one side, and turned his eyes to the ceiling, like a nun in a transport of adoration.

"What of them?" asked Tiger Dick, hailing anything that promised diversion from his own bitter thoughts.

"The dear creatures have been my peculiar success," answered Jim, with no affectation of modesty. "By playing them off one against another, I have managed to enjoy all the advantages of female society without the usual inconveniences. Now, this stunnin' outfit I owe to the generosity of a friend who appreciates, and for some time past has found her own pleasure in gratifying my refined tastes—I submitting to be decorated! But like a naughty truant, I have cut the leash of her apron-string for a little run wild, and propose to turn the gents' furnishing goods to account in support of my native charms and graces for the conquest of the belle of this stirring little town."

"And who may that be?"

"What! you haven't heard of the Golden Serpent?"

"No."

"And how long may you have enjoyed the atmosphere of this camp?"

"Several days. I haven't kept count of them."

"Richard! My son!" exclaimed Shadow Jim, with an expression of deep concern, "I fear

that you are in even a worse condition than I thought. Breathing the same air with the divine, the mysterious, the unapproachable—But, there! Have you been going on this way all the time?"

Tiger Dick smiled savagely, and poured another glass of brandy.

"Stop!" cried Jim, covering the glass with his hand. "You have had enough of that, my friend, just now. I will furnish you with better diversion. You shall go with me, to visit the Goddess of Chance. They have her here in person. I love you, Dick, and don't propose to see you eat your heart out in this way, even if I have to give myself so formidable a rival in the favor of the goddess."

They rose and left the saloon, greatly to the chagrin of Billy Bowlegs, who was promising himself the patronage of two profitable customers.

Near the middle of the one straggling street along which the mining-camp was built they came to a house more pretentious than its shanty neighbors, being two stories high and sided with clapboards, instead of vertical planks and battens.

Unlike the numerous dance-houses that thronged the street, there was no flare of light before this house. The windows were curtained, and only a dim light inclosed in a crimson globe burned in a vestibule.

It was evident that the proprietor of this establishment had the shrewdness to make it conspicuous by contrast.

"Privacy and mystery—that's the dodge!" said Jim, who divined the purpose of this departure from the customs of the place. "It is all on the principle that stolen sweets are most palatable. It's hard though to keep up the illusion in this country, where nothing under the sun need be put under cover."

Entering through a door which of itself swung noiselessly to after them, they found themselves in a brilliantly lighted bar-room the appointments of which were far more elegant than is usual in a mining-town.

At one side of the room was a very elaborate sideboard with a lavish display of cut glass—slender-stemmed wine-glasses, and long-necked and short-bodied decanters—the whole presided over by a gentleman whose oiled hair, waxed mustache, spotless linen and blazing diamonds were truly wonderful to behold.

Variously disposed about the room were broad mirrors of plate glass, which multiplied the assemblage and the lights with dazzling effect.

Traversing this room with no manifestations of interest, Shadow Jim led his protege behind a screen that stood at the further end.

This hid a green baize door which Jim pushed open, disclosing another apartment even more resplendent than the one just left.

The walls and ceilings were decorated with the national colors draped in festoons. An ornate chandelier depended from the center of the ceiling directly above a long table provided with a faro lay-out. Midway on one side sat a lady dealer, dressed in the gay costume of the Spanish donna, making no grudging display of her charms of person except that her face was hidden behind a black mask. But the exquisite delicacy of her bare arms and bosom fired the imagination with an itching curiosity to see the wondrous beauty of face which was withheld.

About her neck was coiled a golden serpent from which she had derived her name.

At her right and left were croupiers with long rakes, which moved higher and thither across the table after each turn of the cards, drawing or pushing variously colored chips, according to the vicissitudes of the game.

Around the table, intent on the game, was a crowd of men who presented marked contrasts as to dress and person.

Here was a "sharp" or "sport" in flash elegance—rings and pins and watch-guard, and clothing of startling pattern and cut; at his elbow was a red-shirted miner, unkempt and frowzy as to hair and beard, and unwashed and not over agreeable to sight, touch or smell as to his toilet. But strapped to his waist were weapons which made one overlook the clay on his boots and the grime on his hands.

To the left and rear of the lady dealer, outside of the circle which pressed around the table, stood a man of more commanding presence than any other in the room. He was perhaps forty-five years of age, and just portly enough in build to make what is called a fine-looking man. His face was fairly intelligent, and had that shrewdness of expression which distinguishes a keen business man.

He stood with folded arms, apparently watching the game with his thoughts elsewhere.

He was known as Adam Farley, and was looked up to as the most extensive mine operator in the progressive city of Coyote.

Rumor linked his name with the Golden Serpent. Indeed, though no such relationship was avowed, it was generally understood that he had a proprietary interest in the game, and in the lady as well. He never participated in the interest which drew the others there; yet he was almost always by, and his mere presence, silent, observant, as we introduce him to the

* See Dime Library, Nos. 29, 171, 251 and 280.

reader, was sufficient to make the patrons of the place circumspect as to their behavior under the stress of adversity.

However contrary luck ran, no one ever hinted that there was anything "peculiar" in it. If the point had been noted, they would have said that it was out of consideration for the lady.

The men who were engaged in the game had no interest beyond the rise and fall of their respective "piles." If one moved back from his place with a smothered oath or an affected swagger, another pushed eagerly into it with a ravenous greed in his eyes, and probably won a sullen glance from beneath knit brows; but though all knew him intimately, there came no light of recognition into the hard eyes that turned again, as by an irresistible fascination, to the little silver box from which hope or despair was drawn with the turn of a card.

But there were two who cared to know more intimately the persons with whom they had to deal.

Between two "turns," while the players were "making their game" and the croupiers at her right and left were settling the losses and gains, the Golden Serpent looked over the intervening heads and caught sight of Tiger Dick's ghastly face.

Instantly she started as with an electric shock. The flash of her eyes, the expression of her face were lost behind her mask; but the sensitive blood was seen to stream over her neck and bosom, and tingle to her ears, and then recede, leaving her pale and still as a statue in marble.

Adam Farley saw this, and his dark face turned fairly purple, and his eyes went over to the entering pair to discover which of them was the cause of this marked effect in his dealer.

CHAPTER V.

A HEART BATTLE.

IN the mood that was then upon him, Iron Despard had no disposition to follow the murderer. For a time it was even doubtful whether he would succor the poor wretch writhing in anguish at his feet. Still the humanity of his better nature pleaded with the savage bitterness of his sense of wrong, and the moaning of the sufferer filled him with a disquiet which, fight it as he might, would not be stilled.

At first the fierce exultation, which was very nearly akin to sympathy with the dastardly crime just committed, abated, leaving him in dense gloom; then he so far yielded as to strike a match to look at him.

This was the first intimation to Bob Cady that he was not alone.

"Never! never!" he cried, rending with his teeth the fragments of paper which he still clutched in his left hand, while he struck upward with his bowie with all his waning strength.

Iron Despard avoided the blow, manifesting neither pity nor anger.

The match, lighting his face, showed Bob his mistake.

"Eh, boss? I'm axin' yer pardon," he said, with painful effort. "I thought it was that treacherous devil a-comin' back fur to finish me. I reckon I'm done fur, stranger; but if so be I kin keep life into me long enough to give ye a word to my gal, Betty, as is in the States—'lowin' ye kin git it to her—an' put ye in the way o' blockin' a mighty low-down game, I'll be like to pass out a little easier."

The flickering match went out, leaving them again in darkness.

Iron Despard had not yet spoken. He did not now make answer. Perhaps it was too late. The wounded man had spoken with extreme difficulty, with breaks, while he gasped for breath; and his articulation became a scarcely distinguishable mumble toward the end, until, as if his spark of life had gone out with the extinction of the match, a dead silence fell with the darkness.

Iron Despard stretched out his hand and touched the face which was hidden from his sight. It was cold and still. The man was either dead or in a swoon.

Should he leave him and go his way? These fellows were scarcely less brutal than the beasts that roamed the mountain. Why should he concern himself with their wrangles, or their fate, if one was left dying or dead—did it matter much which? There would be one less chance of some honest man being wronged.

Honest! What did he care for men honest or otherwise? And he ground his teeth and laughed with savage bitterness.

Still he lingered, and presently gathered the limp body up in his arms and carried it down the mountain path.

At no great distance was a deserted hut, into which he bore his burden and laid it on a shake-down of mountain moss. Then he lighted a pine knot and stuck it into a chink in the wall.

Examination proved that the man was wounded apparently beyond human medicament. He was bleeding from several knife-thrusts, and the last pistol-shot had penetrated his back near the spine.

Iron Despard loosened his clinging fingers and withdrew the fragments of paper.

A partial matching of them showed him a map, which gave significance to the cabalistic

signs with which all of the pieces were covered. He addressed himself to the restoration of the man who alone could throw light upon the matter.

Bob Cady woke to consciousness in delirium. He thought that he was still in the hut with his partner, and the labor of those weary years just rewarded.

"I shall never furgit it, Joe," he said. "I was so clean busted that I couldn't have backed myself with a week's grub-stakes. You may believe it, when I tell ye that my breeches was j-est nothin' at all but flutterin' rags pinned together with thorns. An' that thar brung me my luck."

"When I run acrost this hyar galoot with his topknot a-dryin' in some Injun wigwam an' his carcass a-waitin' fur the coyotes, I was doggone glad that I had got thar fust, to snake him out o' his trowsers an' shake the raglan I had on. You bet I didn't know that I was jumpin' his claim to a gold-mine in the bargain! But when I found this hyar thing sewed up in 'em, I says to myself, says I:

"Things ain't kivered up so thunderin' close unless thar's somethin' worth the kiverin'. I'll jest salt this hyar down an' put in my odd time on it; an' maybe one o' these fine mornin's—wao knows?—keno!"

"But I hadn't got fur into the thing before I made up my mind that it called fur some one more knowledgeable than your humble servant. I allowed I'd show it to a cute chap I knowed in Frisco, an' take the chances of his beatin' me ef thar was anythin' in it."

"But before I got round to it, I heard about a couple o' galoots as had dropped onto a gosh-awful lead jest when they was so nigh starved to death that they had to drop it an' run fur grub."

"One never showed up, an' t'other only managed to crawl into camp clean off his head, he was so grub-struck. He kep' chinnin' it about a thunderin' big strike an' a map, ontel the hull camp was wild. Some allowed as it was all wind; but others reckoned that thar might be some bottom to it."

"When the chap got his idees straightened out ag'in, you bet they laid fur him! But he was as close as an oyster; so then they swore that it meant biz!"

"It got whispered about that the galoot as had the searchin' of his clo's wouldn't want nothin' better; an' then he had to shoot two or three that he caught doggin' of him, before he made 'em understand that the man as proposed to go through him would hev to get up airy in the mornin'."

"But that made the boys all the surer; an' wherever he went he had a reg'lar procesh a-follerin' of him—picks, pans, camp kittles an' all—until one day he give the best of 'em the slip, an' slid fur parts unknown."

"Wal, when I heard this hyar yarn, ye bet I says, says I:

"I ain't a-goin' to throw away my luck on no snoozer what hails from Frisco!—that's flat! I reckon I'll hang to it myself ontel Old Nick chokes me off! An' you bet that's jest what I done!"

All this was said, at first with painful effort, and with breaks not indicated in our rendition. But as the speaker progressed he derived strength from a growing excitement; and his speech became more rapid and connected.

"But it's all fur my gal Betty, God bless her!" he went on, with a tender lighting up of the face.

At that Iron Despard began to scowl and grin his teeth.

"Another fool!" he muttered. "Curse the whole treacherous crew! does no one escape their wiles?"

But, unconscious of the tempest of passion his words were stirring up in the breast of his auditor, Bob Cady began to chuckle softly to himself.

"I wonder what she'll say when I pour her apurn full o' gold an' di'mon's! Gold and di'mon's!" he repeated, gloating over the words. "Thar won't be nothin' in this hyar world that's too good fur her, ye understand. She shall ride in her kirriage, behind hoeses that'll jest take the shine off'm ary rig in Cloverdale!"

"But, pard, what do you think she'll buy with this hyar money the fust thing arter we've got back from our weddin' tour? A new bunnit with a rooster-tail onto it? Haw! haw! haw! Nary, ole man! Ye don't know women critters yit, not by a few! What then? Why, a plug hat an' boots with white legs to 'em fur the chap as is to drive her, a-settin' upon a high seat in front! That's what takes a woman's eye! But, Lord love her! won't she lay back an' oggle Mrs. Jedge Roun'tree through gold-rimmed eye-glasses! Not that her eyes ain't as keen as yours or mine, ye understand; but it's the style!"

"And this idiot counts it a privilege to cater to her vanities!" growled Iron Despard.

"But won't she 'a' airnt it?" pursued Bob, eagerly. "Why, she might 'a' been Mrs. Jedge Roun'tree herself, only she had a sneakin' notion fur yer humble sarvant! Purty! Waal, I should smile! All the fly young bucks in Cloverdale was a-punchin' heads over her; but

she says:—'Excuse me, gentlemen!' says she, an' jest nestles her head on my shoulder, an' says I'm her Bob, an', rich or poor, she don't want nothin' better—an' me without a rap to rub ag'in another!"

"So Jim Roun'tree he marries the school-marm, as kin chin hog-latin an' all them furrin languages, an' waltzes her off to the Eu-ro-pean countries, as if this hyar great an' glorious republic wa'n't good enough fur ary white man! An' when they come back they flourished round like as if common folks wa'n't nowhar arter the kings an' dukes an' sich they'd been cheek by jowl with!"

"Then Jim Roun'tree got a double half-hitch on Betty's ole man; an' before he let up on him, he had him in the bone-yard an' his folks almost on the town—all accordin' to law! Oh! it was all down in the books, you bet! Jim Roun'tree was too fly to do anythin' that he couldn't give ye page an' paragraph fur. But the traps fur to ketch honest men an' let rogues slide that he hadn't on his finger-ends was mighty few, now let me tell ye! So he seen his chance, an' went fur the ole man fur all he was worth."

"Waal, I'd 'a' had the satisfaction o' moppin' the ground with him, only Betty she hung around me, an' allowed as that was jest what would suit him to death; an' I was a-breakin' of her heart, a-runnin' into trouble that wouldn't make matters no better, but a doggone sight worse. She had her old woman on her hands, as wasn't the easiest to get along with, along of her havin' the hyp' an' the rheumatics an' the tic-douloureux an' the Lord only knows what else!—an' thar was the childern as was younger'n her, the which she had to keep 'em in whole clo's an' grub, an' school 'em herself the best she could; an' ef she didn't have me to come to fur comfort, what would she do?"

"Waal, pard, ye may believe me, them things ain't no ways easy fur to stand an' look on an' see; so I says to Betty, says I:

"I'll go out West, an' make both our fortunes, the which I might stay in Cloverdale till doomsday, all the while a-scratching of a poor man's back!"

"You'd a-thought she'd break her heart lettin' me go out of her sight; but everybody was wild with news of finds that made yer mouth water, an' I come away with the crowd."

"O' course some was killed by the Injuns, an' some starved to death, an' some thought 'em-selves lucky to git back home with both pockets turned inside out. Them as stayed, some turned road-agent, some took to gamblin', an' the rest knocked round from pillar to post, jest keepin' soul an' body together. Hyar an' thar one, as scarce as hen's teeth, struck it rich. That's minin'!"

"But I couldn't go back with holes in my trowsers; so I hung on fur a year, now an' then a-gittin' heart-breakin' letters from my gal Betty. It was always the same song. What she wanted was her Bob! Money be blowed! When was her Bob comin' back?"

"You bet them letters shook me up powerful! It's a mighty hard man as don't weaken when the woman as he'd pour out his heart's blood fur tells him she's hungerin' fur the sight of him, an' he knowin' all the time that she could have the best man in the country fur jest the sayin' so! I've got 'em hyar, all of 'em, sewed up in an oil-skin belt, the which they're worth more'n their weight in di'mon's!"

"Jest then I fell onto this tbing, an' it drove me nearly crazy. Thar wa'n't no goin' back then until I was rich enough to buy an' sell Jim Roun'tree the best day he ever see! I didn't tell her nothin' about it; but I jest kept a-poundin' at this hyar thing fur four straight years, an' them letters a-comin' an' a-comin'!"

"Pard, I've seen the day when I cursed enough to shake the heavens down about my ears, ef things panned out that way, because luck struck all around me, but never jest whar I was, an' this thing stumped me every time; an' I've seen the day when I cried like a child. But now I've got 'em! I've got 'em!"

And the speaker laughed shrilly.

"Rich! rich!" he shouted, raising himself on his elbow. "Do ye know what that means? It means that I'm goin' to me this fifty years, as has been breakin' her heart fur me this five years, as patient an' faithful as ary saint in heaven!—an' she a-strugglin' with poverty an' sorer! God bless her, I say!—God bless her! Ain't she goin' fur to have all the gold an' di'mon's she kin stand up under, an' her old woman have a new black silk dress, an' the kids have an edication that'll knock the spots out o' that schol-ma'am? Waal, I reckon!"

"Joe, d'ye know what I be? I'm the happiest man between sun-up an' sun-down, I be! Hooray! hooray! hooray!"

He sat upright and swung his hand above his head as he cheered; but at the finish he reeled and fell back, unconscious, if not dead.

He was not heeded. His sole auditor sat with his arms stretched straight before him across a rude table, and his head bowed upon them. In this posture had he listened to the recital just concluded. Who can say what had been passing through his soul the while?

He could not have told how long he sat thus; but after a long period he went over to the

wounded man and searched for signs of life, if any were to be found.

There were none. Neither breath nor heartbeat were perceptible.

Iron Despard loosened his shirt and took from his body the oil-skin belt he had spoken of.

For a long time he held it in his hand, gazing at it gloomily. Then he deliberately ripped it open and emptied its contents upon the table.

The belt was covered with blood; but the letters had been protected.

There was a score of them, at least. The handwriting, albeit not highly trained, had a delicate grace about it that was suggestive of womanliness. All of the sheets were more or less tear-blistered.

Was it sacrilege for the eye of a stranger to trace these lines along which a woman had poured her heart? Might it be done in honor?

Without debating the question Iron Despard entered upon the task. The feeling with which he began was fierce hatred toward the writer, as being a woman, and also toward himself, for consenting to do what he was doing.

One by one he read them through, with that settled frown. It did not soften when he came to heart-cries so intense that they almost seemed audible across that interval of space and time. It was the record of such a love as now and then redeems all the fickleness and selfishness of human nature.

When their perusal was done he bowed his head once more on his arms, and his strong nature was shaken to its center by great throes of emotion that were close locked behind his tightly compressed lips.

No sound escaped him; but when on hearing a long-drawn sigh, he raised his head, his face was as pale as death.

He went over to the man whom he had supposed dead. There were signs of returning life. After a second examination he proceeded to bind his wounds.

He looked about him. The hut was too desolate to justify the hope of successfully nursing a man so hard beset by death.

He went outside and constructed a rude litter of two parallel saplings with cross-pieces, on which he strewed mountain moss to serve as a mattress.

Lifting the wounded man upon this, he dragged him down the road which led into the mining-camp.

Knocking at the door of one of the shanties, he was challenged by a woman's voice:

"Who's hyar?"

"I have brought you a wounded man, to see if you can keep the life in him," replied Iron Despard, not cordially, but in an uncompromising business tone.

"I reckon I'd ought to know that voice. Is it Colonel Dangerfield?"

"It is."

"Jest hold on a bit, till I git into some clo's."

A light was struck, and after a brief scuffling sound a woman opened the door, her appearance evidencing a hasty and imperfect toilet.

"Oh! poor deary!" she murmured, with a woman's ready sympathy, at sight of the sufferer. "I'll help you bring him right in."

In a hard, repellent voice Iron Despard directed her how to assist him, and together they bore the limp body into the house.

After assuring her that he would be responsible for the man's care—which she deprecated, declaring that "he was as welcome to anything she could do for him as if he was her own"—Despard left the house, and going toward the center of the camp, entered the gambling-house presided over by the Golden Serpent.

It was now two o'clock; and the lengthening intervals of silence, broken now and then by the howling of some drunken fellow reeling out of a saloon to stagger his devious way toward the hut, scarcely better than a kennel, which was his nearest approach to a home, showed that the nightly bacchanal was drawing to a close.

But when are men ready to leave the den of the "tiger"?

As Iron Despard entered the outer saloon, he heard raised voices in the gambling-room. The ensuing excitement was instantaneous, and he was borne along in the rush into a scene of tragic import!

CHAPTER VI.

STRIKE!

SHADOW JIM seemed best to "fill the bill" of a lady's man; and upon him Adam Farley fixed a basilisk glance of hatred.

Jim, we remember, was bent on a conquest; so he was desirous of securing a place directly opposite the fair dealer. But the crowd at this point made it impossible; and he was fain to content himself with a position at one end of the table.

There his "killing" glances were enough to inflame Adam Farley's jealous suspicions as far as he was concerned; and the studied avoidance of looking in that direction on the part of the dealer seemed equally significant.

With an oath Adam Farley promised himself that he would soon cut the comb of that young bantam!

Tiger Dick, on the contrary, gave no cause for suspicion. He took no more notice of the

lady than of the rude miners among whom he unceremoniously elbowed his way.

From the moment that he put his money on the "lay-out" it was plain that he was as oblivious to his surroundings—all but the sliding cards and the announcements of the dealer, the music of whose voice seemed to make no impression upon his rapt soul—as an opium-smoker, while watching the fatal yet seductive drug boil in the flame of his spirit-lamp, or rubbing it on the rim of his pipe, preparatory to the few brief whiffs which are to waft him to his heaven of ineffable delights.

At first he had varying fortunes, until presently the fickle goddess seemed to smile upon him determinedly, and the pile of checks that grew at his right hand won envious glances from bloodshot eyes of disappointed men.

Then waves of excitement began to shake the stony calm of that gathering, which was like a smoldering volcano—all peaceful verdure without, and raging fire within.

Old gamblers abandoned their pet schemes, which they fondly imagined were sure to "beat the bank"—a success which ever flitted just before them like a mirage—and ranged their chips beside those of this, for the time being, favorite of fortune. But others, whom sad experience had made suspicious of such appearances, went just the other way, with a feeling as if chance were a malicious intelligence that delighted to lead men into snares, raising them into Heaven to plunge them the more deeply into hell!

Something almost wolfish appeared in the countenances of each of these classes.

Those who bet against the bank did so with the fierce exultation with which a man watches the dying struggles of a wild beast that he has throttled. They were springing at the throat of the ruthless monster that had rent them many a time and oft!

Those who took the other side, with a feeling that fortune must relent in favor of one so hard beset, chuckled within themselves at the disappointment which would presently fall upon those so eager to spoil the "tiger."

In this quivering atmosphere of hope and fear those who represented the bank on the one hand, and Tiger Dick on the other, sat as unmoved, to all outward appearance, as statues of stone.

Again and again he won, seeming almost unconscious, while all about him the excitement waxed higher and higher.

Shadow Jim, whose weakness for money made him an indifferent gambler, except when fleeing a "flat," lost his nerve, and interposed:

"Fur God's sake, Dick, let up while luck is with you, or pull some of that in. A man can't win all the time; it is just temptin' fate to double right along on one card."

Tiger Dick looked round at him over his shoulder, vacantly. Still he let his "pile" stay where it was. Every turn of the cards doubled his wealth; but at any time the next turn might leave him "broke."

"Is the queen *always* to win?" growled a miner, who had coppered his bet again and again. "He hain't put a stiver on anything else sense he come into the place; an' after the first shiffin', as ef he was feelin' his grip, he hain't took up nothin' when it was once laid down. Yet he's fetched her every time she has showed her mug! Ef she'd only split once in a while!"

The Sportive Sport, who was taking no part in the game, looked on with a curious smile. He was familiar enough with faro to know the difference between a one-card and a two-card box; he could detect the "sand tell" and the "tongue tell" by both eye and ear—a rare accomplishment; and he observed now that the dealer attempted none of the usual stocking dodges—stripping, milking, snowing, etc.

"It really looks like an honest game," he reflected. "The bank seems to be content with its natural percentage. But ten to one they have the donna in training for future gulls. Such Christian virtue as this can't last long!"

It was now in the second deal since this unprecedented sequence had started, and still every queen turned up against the bank.

The excitement had become almost a frenzy. Revolvers and bowie-knives were drawn, and every eye was on the alert to detect any attempted trick on the part of the dealer. If she yielded to the temptation to serve the interests of her backer by indirection, it was probable that even her sex would not save her from the fury of the crowd.

Tiger Dick was the only man who paid no heed to her deft fingers.

By this time all were betting on the queen, either open or coppered, so that the other cards passed unheeded.

Adam Farley stood with folded arms, rather paler than usual, but otherwise unmoved. He was looking for the turn which in the natural order of things must come sooner or later, and sweep back into his coffers the golden tide that had so steadily ebbed thus far.

As the impression grew that Tiger Dick was staking all on a gambler's superstition, and would hang on until he broke the bank, leaving his winnings to accumulate, Adam Farley, who

rightly believed that the game was a pure matter of mathematics, with which the powers of air, if there were any such, never interfered, one way or the other—as his persistence made this impression stronger, the backer of the Golden Serpent wore a smile behind his mask of stony imperturbability.

He had many a time seen over-confident faith disappointed in this way.

Of what avail the early winnings, if the lucky man came to grief at last? His fabric of luck would tumble like a house of cards at a single puff.

But there came a time when this gentleman of iron nerve knew that the solvency of his bank hung upon the next turn.

He now waited with something of the fierce watchfulness of an ambushed panther.

But one queen remained in the box. Turn after turn found her still coy. The excitement steadily increased until the "call" was reached. She must be one of the three remaining cards!

Men who have staked their money on the turn of a card are always ready to suspect the honesty of their natural enemy—the dealer. Perhaps half of those grouped about the table began to have misgivings that the pack had been tampered with, and that the queen would be found to be missing.

More than one swore under his breath that if such was the case *somebody* should be held to account. They did not specify, even in their own minds, who that "somebody" was; but they again fingered their weapons.

Tiger Dick alone seemed unmoved. He called out in a cold, mechanical tone:

"Seven, queen, ace."

If the cards made their appearance in that order, he would be entitled to three times the stake he had on the table.

The ten of diamonds was the uppermost card in the box.

It was drawn out, disclosing the seven of spades beneath.

A death-like hush fell upon the crowd.

All were electrified by a startling interruption.

A powerful miner leaped upon the end of the table opposite that at which Tiger Dick sat, flourishing a buckskin bag above his head, and shouting vociferously:

"Wait jest one heavenly minute, marm! A thousand dollars to two hundred that he takes the biscuit!"

"Done!" cried a man who had been coppering persistently.

He felt, not sympathy with the bank, but a savage hostility toward the man whose unreasonable good-luck had depleted his pocket while it was bleeding the bank.

Here was an opportunity to more than make good his losses, with extraordinary odds in his favor on an even chance, unless one believed in fate, which perhaps every one about the table did, more or less.

The bet was offered and accepted before the Golden Serpent recovered from the momentary start at the suddenness of the interruption.

She merely turned her eyes toward the excitable miner, and then drew the seven-spot from its place.

Before it had slid half way out, a shout that seemed as if it would raise the roof went up from the mad crowd.

All eyes had been centered upon the box; and the moment the colors of the picture-card were discernible, all knew that it was the queen of hearts.

Hats were tossed into the air, and the man who had nothing at stake, as well as some who won by the operation, shook each other by the hand, as if it were a matter for general congratulation.

The winner of the bet at odds burst into uproarious laughter, slapping his thigh with his hat.

"Pardner," he shouted, as he leaped down from his position and smote the loser on the back, "thar's nothin' like sand fur fetchin' the old gal, eh? She's like all the critters of her kind; she likes a gally galoot!—the gallier the better!"

But the gentleman who was out of pocket only frowned his disgust as he "forked over" the two hundred.

Two men showed no sign of perturbation, any more than if they were unconscious of the hubbub that was going on about them.

Tiger Dick sat like a man of stone. He made no effort to touch his winnings.

Adam Farley still stood with folded arms; but he was as pale as death.

The croupier proceeded with his business of settling the bank's accounts with the several players. Although his movements were mechanical from the force of habit, yet his hand trembled.

The lady dealer put the two piles of cards together, made two or three passes in the way of shuffling, and then sat still, holding the pack idly.

This unusual proceeding was not at once noticed by the excited crowd.

Shadow Jim had long ere this seized his old patron by the hand, and adjured him:

"Take a fool's advice, old man, and run to cover! You've got your pile—all you'll git this

CHAPTER VII.

"THREE OF A KIND."

clatter. The next one, up she goes! Fur God's sake, Dick, don't give 'em a chance to come back at ye to-night!"

Tiger Dick sat unresponsive, frowning blackly straight before him. It was evident that he found no gratification in his success. Indeed his whole participation in the game seemed purely mechanical.

Without disturbing his winnings, he turned to Shadow Jim and observed, with an absent laugh:

"A queer world, ain't it?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Jim, not catching the connection.

"Money! money!" muttered Dick. "H'm! h'm!"

It was the sneering laugh of a man whose soul is too full of bitterness for violent expression.

The rough fellows about him did not understand his contempt for the gold, the lust for which made their veins throb with feverish passion.

"What's the matter with you, Dick?" asked Shadow Jim, with growing concern. "You ain't yourself, old man. By Jove! you need some one to take care of you! Here! rake in this—"

He extended his hand to draw Dick's stake off the card.

Tiger Dick's hand fell upon his restrainingly; but he manifested no annoyance at his friend's presumption.

At this moment the croupier finished settling the bets.

The Golden Serpent rose in her place.

"Gentlemen," she said, in her flute-like tones, "there will be no more play to-night."

A deathlike silence followed this announcement. The men looked at one another. Each read in his neighbor's eye a confirmation of his own thought. Then on a sudden rose a yell in which exultation and derision blended in about equal parts.

Tiger Dick had broken the bank!

The dealer was a woman. Moreover she had more than the natural chagrin of a defeated representative of the bank to goad her to a sarcastic expression of malice.

"Allow me to congratulate you, sir, on your success," she said; "and to express the hope that in your case the converse of the proverb will not prove true!—that, successful in play, you may not be unsuccessful in love."

Until now Tiger Dick had not looked at her—perhaps thus piquing one used to the homage of men. But the moment she addressed him directly, he fixed his eyes on her, and seemed to drink in her voice with gluttonous ears.

His face underwent a terrible change, lighting up with a scorn which the traces of dissipation intensified.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, in a way that suggested the bark of a hyena, and with a drawing back of the lip, disclosing the teeth, that bore out the similitude. "Do you fancy that I count the acquisition of this filthy stuff good fortune? Your gold!" he cried, with acrid disdain.

And gathering up the medley of gold dust, faro chips, and money, he showered it over her with a contemptuous laugh.

The woman leaped back, uttering a cry of rage, as if stung by this hail of scorn. She cowered under it as from the touch of ignominy. Her neck and bosom flamed scarlet, and then turned livid.

With a snarl of concentrated rage, Adam Farley leaped forward, snatching a revolver from his bosom.

But the Golden Serpent waved him back with her left hand while she drew a dagger with her right, and leaped toward the man who had so grossly insulted her.

Tiger Dick tore open the bosom of his shirt, so as to bare his breast to her blade.

"Strike!" he cried. "You will do well to let out the bell you have implanted here!"

And he sunk upon one knee before her, that she might have a fair mark.

The spectators stood aghast.

The woman hesitated, wavered, let fall the glittering poniard, and sunk swooning into the arms of her backer, Adam Farley.

Like loose gunpowder the chivalry of the camp flared up.

With a yell of rage, the crowd as one man tore out revolvers and bowies; and Tiger Dick was surrounded on all sides by bloodthirsty avengers of a woman's honor.

He seemed quite careless of his danger. He looked at the threatening weapons with an indifferent smile, and seemed to scorn to make any attempt at self-defense.

Not so some who looked on.

It will be remembered that Iron Despard had come to the saloon, and that the Sportive Sport was drawn there by the good fellowship of old acquaintances who wished to show him the "lions" of the camp.

Without preconcert, but moved by a common sentiment, both of these men leaped forward, placing themselves between the crowd and their intended victim.

Then eyes crossed fire, and weapons frowned muzzle to muzzle!

THE revolver of the Sportive Sport was flanked by the open palm with "ALWAYS" traced across it, and his face wore the serene smile that his enemies had learned to fear in the olden time.

On the other hand, Iron Despard's eyes gleamed as they did when, beset on all sides, he made the terrible havoc among his foes which won him his sobriquet of Despard the Duelist.

It was the Sportive Sport who spoke in his blandest accents.

"Hold on, gentlemen! Don't you see that our friend here is not himself? No doubt the lady has a responsible friend who can vindicate her at a proper time and in a proper way. Meanwhile we are not murderers to jump on a man in a body."

While the crowd was thus held at bay, Shadow Jim, who always held valor second to prudence, had an eye to the main chance.

"Waal, I'll swear!" he ejaculated. "As good money as ever was coined!"

And he evinced alacrity and discrimination in scooping up the most valuable of it, and stuffing it into his pockets.

Then he seized Tiger Dick by the arm.

"Hyar, my son!" he said, "in your present frame of mind, this is no place for you. You need to travel for your health." And he unceremoniously hustled him out of the room.

Their retreat was covered by Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport.

Great was the wrath of the men of Coyote at being thus browbeaten by a party of strangers. Their money won, and indignity offered to the goddess in their temple of chance on which they especially prided themselves! For what other camp could show so delightful a mystery as the Golden Serpent? No man in Coyote, save, perhaps, Adam Farley, could boast of having seen her face, yet all were ready to swear that she had no peer in beauty in the mountains.

So they pressed after the offending party to the very door of the saloon, scowling and muttering and trying to goad one another on to the attack, yet none daring to take that responsibility on himself.

It will be remembered that there was no blaze of light in front of the "Golden Serpent"—for the saloon had derived its name from the lady who presided over it; and at this late hour the nightly saturnalia of the camp was over and the various saloons closed and dark.

No sooner, then, had the friends passed the door than they seemed to vanish in the darkness.

The furious denizens of Coyote poured out after them, and then gave free rein to their passion. Choice selections of blasphemy were hurled after them, and pistol-shots were fired at random in the darkness.

As this was no rare occurrence in Coyote, those who were comfortably housed and bunked simply turned over with a muttered anathema at being disturbed in their slumbers, all of which might be avoided if the gentlemen would only have their "leetle diffikulties" at a more seasonable hour.

Meanwhile the friends were under the guidance of Iron Despard.

"Gentlemen," he had said, "I have a proposition to lay before you which it may be worth your while to consider, if your time is not otherwise employed."

Tiger Dick laughed bitterly.

"You have seen the employment of my time!" he replied. "If you have any work which will keep the devil at bay, I am with you."

"If you conclude to act with me, we will have a common interest in secrecy; if you do not, I trust to your honor to let what I am about to communicate go no further."

"I assure you beforehand that it will suit me, if it only has enough fighting in it. I want something to keep my blood warm, and am not very particular what."

"There is every prospect of enough fighting to meet any ordinary requirement."

"Then count me in without further words."

"I," said the Sportive Sport, "must find work that has some profit in it, as well as amusement. The day of mere 'fun' has passed with me."

In the light, the necessity of preventing his face from betraying him keeps a man on his guard at all points; but in the darkness, which he knows the eye cannot penetrate, his vigilance is relaxed; he forgets that to an intelligent ear his voice is as sure an index of what is going on within.

No one understood this fact more fully than did Iron Despard; and it was his habit to use this means of getting an inner knowledge of the men with whom he had to deal.

He now detected in the voice of the Sportive Sport that bitterness which he had taken such pains to disguise in his manner when before the eyes of men. Of course he did not as yet know its cause; but the time was to come when he would put a construction upon it in keeping with the monomania which possessed him, and thus be hurried on to a fatal error.

"There will be enough profit too, if I am not greatly mistaken," he replied.

"That is my one stipulation. For the rest I am not averse to enough risk to make the game interesting," the Sportive Sport answered.

Shadow Jim felt that he was called upon to say something, so he delivered himself to this effect:

"Waal, gents, ef it is my put-in, as it seems to be, allow me to say that in my case it all depends. My friend, Tiger Dick, hyar—the which nobody is better qualified to testify—will tell you that whar jewty calls or friendship beckons, Shadow Jim is always to the fore. Moreover, whar beauty oppressed demands a champion, Shadow Jim's yer huckleberry! But filty lucre! Nobody so scorns the contaminating 'root'! And glory! Let others wear the laurel; I prefer a modest buttonhole bouquet of violets! Gentlemen, you may serve stern Mars; I burn my incense at the shrine of Venus! Lapped in the sunshine of her smiles, fanned by the Lydian zephyrs of her sighs, with the ambrosial nectar of her tears—"

"Has any gentleman present anything to drink? I find myself quite unequal to the theme without the inspiration—Thanks, me lord! many thanks! Ah!—um!"

Tiger Dick, knowing his needs, had passed him his flask.

He inverted it over his mouth; and during the momentary silence that followed, while Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport speculated what manner of man they had run across, the only sound audible was the gurgle of the liquid in its passage down his throat.

Before he had recovered from the ecstatic trance into which the imbibing of his favorite beverage seemed to throw him, Iron Despard entered upon the narrative of the cryptogram which had fallen into his hands.

He told of his encounter with the murderer and his victim, of the crumpled and torn paper in the clutch of the knife and bullet-riddled man, and of the ravings that had put him in possession of the history of the precious cipher during the years while Bob Cady had delved for its secret more persistently than he had dug in the earth for its treasures.

But not a word of the personal history of the luckless miner; not a word about the woman whose bleeding heart had been laid bare in her letters.

"And now, gentlemen," he concluded, "this tallies exactly with a circumstance with which you may be familiar. I refer to the Bigelow brothers so notorious four years ago. You may recall the nuggets of almost virgin gold found on the person of the one who was fortunate enough to make his way to camp, and his ravings about a find of fabulous richness."

"I myself saw the man, and was one of those to whom he gave the slip!" declared the Sportive Sport. "So this was his end; and we have got the famous map after all. I never saw a greater excitement than he stirred up; and for months after his disappearance all sorts of stories were afloat. One was that he had turned up in Frisco, a bonanza king, driving his four-in-hand and flinging money right and left. Another was that he had organized a band of sworn defenders of the gulch in which his claim lay, and held it guarded at every point by armed men, while he took out pure gold in blocks, like granite from a quarry."

"Did you believe that there was anything in the representation of the man himself?" asked Iron Despard.

"Indeed I did!" declared the Sportive Sport. "There is not the shadow of a doubt that he had on his person specimens of extraordinary richness, and a quantity of them. The value of the nuggets in his possession was variously stated; but I believe that a thousand dollars would not be an exaggeration."

"You would then be willing to follow up this clew, on the chance of its being the map of the Bigelow brothers, and of its panning out something worth while?"

"I would jump at a slimmer prospect than that!" said the Sportive Sport. "But you say that it is written in cipher, and that the key which has cost four years of brain-cudgeling is locked up in the head of a man now delirious and likely to die at any moment."

"On the contrary, among the scraps of paper are two of different material from those on which the map is traced; and they bear the characters of the cipher with letters of the English alphabet opposite."

"You have the key?" cried the Sportive Sport excitedly.

"I have parts of the key," corrected Iron Despard—"enough to show that one has been made out, and that the men struggled for its possession."

"How many letters can you make out?"

"Six or seven."

"And the balance of the key is in the hands of the treacherous partner?"

"Exactly."

"It becomes a part of our business, then, to make him disgorge," said Tiger Dick.

"That is the first step," assented Iron Despard.

"Count on me in that connection!" said the

Tiger. "Hang the gold! It is the fighting that I'm after!"

"But you have the whole of the cryptogram?" asked the Sportive Sport.

"I am sorry to say that a part of that is also missing."

"And the chance of the murderer is as good, if not better, than our own!" cried the Sportive Sport, with keen chagrin.

"No. The map is intact."

"That's something. But he may be in possession of a translation of the whole, which will serve his purpose without the map. The only way they could test the correctness of their key would be to make a consistent translation by means of it."

"That must be admitted."

"But it will add nothing to our task to get both key and translation from the robber," suggested Tiger Dick. "What, with scraps of the cryptogram and scraps of the key and scraps of the translation, I think we should make out very nicely."

"If we can catch the holder before he has time to make way with his share of the scraps," appended the Sportive Sport.

"Can?" cried Tiger Dick, in fine scorn. "Give me the man, and I'll answer for the information!"

"No doubt. But even in your scheme the man comes first. Who is he? Where is he? How many has he at his back? These surely are questions worthy of consideration."

"My only correction is that you make too many of them. The momentous question is: Where is he? Answer me that, and the rest will answer themselves."

"Unfortunately, I know neither who he is, nor where he may be found," Iron Despard had to declare.

"So much the better!" cried Tiger Dick. "It will give us something to exercise our wits over."

"What do you know of the rightful owner of the cryptogram?" asked the Sportive Sport.

"Only that his name is Bob," answered Despard.

As he had made no reference to Betty or her letters, he could not tell them that the envelopes had been removed, probably to keep the collection of letters as small in bulk as possible. As she had always addressed him in terms of endearment, it was natural that his surname did not appear.

"And there is no clew whatever to the partner?"

"Yes. I recall that in his ravings he addressed him as Joe."

"Then we are to look for two partners by the names of Bob and Joe respectively. There is no chance of getting more information from the wounded man?"

"If he ever comes to his senses, with the slightest chance of recovery, he will be too weak to press with exciting questions. I am now on my way to Doctor Warren, and went to the Golden Serpent as the likeliest place to find him."

"He was there," said the Sportive Sport. "I saw him in the crowd a moment before the fracas started. And in fine pickle he was, too. You will have to put his head under the pump before you can get any very precise surgery out of him."

"On the contrary," laughed Tiger Dick, "he works all the better in a condition that would put any other man under the table. He is never so drunk as to unnerve his hand when it comes to making a clean cut."

"I shall have to return to the Golden Serpent for him," answered Iron Despard, in a matter-of-course tone, as if the situation there was not such as would have tested the nerve of a man less reckless of danger than he. "When all the saloons in the camp save one are closed, there is never any question as to where he is to be found. But before I go, let us come to some decision in the matter before us. Are you with me, gentlemen?"

"Against the world!" was Tiger Dick's assurance.

"Most heartily," the Sportive Sport assented.

Iron Despard turned toward Shadow Jim.

"Waal, gentlemen," said that worthy, "I feel that I am put in a rather delicate position. My heart is with you. Don't doubt that. And if I can in any way further your interests, believe that it will be the happiest privilege of my life. But I have another to consider. Ahem! One who has intrusted the green tendrils of her affections to my keeping! I appeal to you, gentlemen. Can I prove unworthy of the trust? Would gold or glory heal her bleeding heart, bereft by my absence? Nay, tempt me not with dreams of storied fame! Gild not the pill of separation with glittering dross that—ah—that—Hem! hem!"

He coughed behind his hand, and abruptly said:

"If any gentleman—Ah! how can I express my indebtedness to you! My emotions sometimes overcome me thus. There are themes that touch the tender spot in the heart of the hardest of men. The wizard elixir which makes the poor man rich, and enables the rich man to soar superior to the traditional dilemma of the

camel and the needle's-eye! Gentlemen I pray you join me in this benevolent sentiment: may poor humanity never lack its consoling balm! Ah!—um!"

While he was healing his lacerated sensibilities, Iron Despard turned to the others.

"Let us three then pledge ourselves in a league, offensive and defensive against all men. What has brought us together so opportunely will probably range the whole camp against us. So we shall have to fight honest men as well as knaves."

They joined hands in the darkness.

"We do so pledge ourselves!"

By this time Shadow Jim recovered, and murmured with a sigh:

"I thank thee, Bacchus! Eh! what the deuce is that?"

The others also started.

The interruption was the sharp yelp of a dog, which leaped away from their vicinity and vanished down the street, sending back the short barks which indicate fright.

"That fellow did not take fright at us," the Sportive Sport declared.

"No," averred Tiger Dick. "He barks as if he had been hurt."

"Which means—"

"Eavesdroppers!"

"We'll see about that!" and without more ado, Iron Despard strode toward the spot from which the animal had sprung away.

The others waited the issue, not feeling that there was any particular call for their interposition.

Three steps took Iron Despard out of their sight, so dense was the darkness.

He could not have taken more than a half a dozen of his soldier-like strides, when a bright flash burnt a hole in the night; and the spiteful crack of a revolver was followed by a cry of:—

"My God!"

Then the dull thud of a heavy falling body needed no interpreter.

"Good heavens! they have shot him!" cried the Sportive Sport.

He leaped toward the spot while the words were darting across his lips.

Tiger Dick was at his very heels.

"Down with the villains! No quarter!" he shouted.

The Sportive Sport did not clear the space of more than a rod, when he tripped over something and fell with stunning force to the ground.

Tiger Dick, so close behind him that even in that impenetrable darkness he saw him fall, leaped into the air, clearing the body he could not distinguish after it left the level of his eye.

With the sound of flying feet ahead, he followed on, guided only by the sense of hearing.

Shadow Jim uttered no sound but he glided away in the darkness like a phantom.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ASSAULT.

JOE MORAN was not a coward under ordinary circumstances; but like most, if not all ignorant men, he was superstitious; and the invisible hand that had interposed between him and his intended victim had unnerved him.

When he had cooled off—and his undress was favorable to rapid refrigeration, physical if not mental—reason resumed sway; and he had the good sense to get into his clothes.

He seemed to invest himself with the courage, as he donned the garments of a man; and by the time he was fully clothed, he had almost persuaded himself that the whole thing was a scare, so that he mustered courage to sally forth with a cocked revolver in one hand and his yet blood-stained bowie in the other.

Investigation has proved that the wonderful sense of locality, distance and direction of the savage, which has hitherto been ascribed to instinct, is in reality a matter of cultivation; and that the white man, with the same advantages of training, surpasses the aboriginal. The wild life of the border, where safety depends on keeping the faculty of observation constantly on the strain, has been the school in which numberless men have acquired this Indian-like sagacity.

Hence, in spite of the disadvantage of excitement, Joe Moran had no difficulty in making his way to the spot where his purpose of murder had been frustrated.

Then he followed on down the mountain trail, with eye and ear on the alert for the slightest suspicious sound.

He knew of the deserted hut to which Iron Despard had borne his betrayed partner; and thitherward he picked his way.

All was silent and dark; but as he approached he perceived the odor of burning pine. This was proof that some one had at least been here.

It was a hazardous thing only to creep to the door of the hut and listen for sounds of life within; but when he heard neither motion nor breathing, Joe Moran took the supreme risk of pushing open the door and entering.

He dared further and struck a match.

He found a recently-extinguished torch, and fresh blood on the shake-down of moss in the corner.

Then with the dogged recklessness of a man who thrusts all reasonable caution behind him, he ignited the torch and carried it out of doors.

He found traces of the litter on which Iron Despard had dragged the unconscious Bob; and the whole situation was revealed to him.

Dashing the torch to the earth, and setting his foot on it, he started down the trail toward Coyote, advancing more rapidly, yet with caution.

Bob was already in charge of the widow Reilly; and Iron Despard had gone to his meeting with Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport at the Golden Serpent.

Joe Moran was in time to see the last man leave the latest-open saloon; and recognizing a kindred spirit, he intercepted him.

"Hallo, Denny!" he saluted.

"Who's hyar?" asked the fellow, stopping abruptly, and letting his hand fall on his revolver, while he glared about to very little purpose in the darkness.

"Don't ye drop to the voice of a cove that has cleaned you out many an' many's the time at Californy Jack?"

"Is that you, Moran?"

"Cheese it! We ain't blowin' names to-night."

"What's goin'? Eh, old man?"

The speaker instantly dropped his voice to a guarded whisper, and crept forward until he was almost nose to nose with the other.

It was plain that he scented rascality with a keen relish.

"How long have you been in Billy Bowlegs' place?" asked Moran.

"An hour, I reckon," was the reply.

"Then you hain't seen no man draggin' another into the camp on a brush litter?"

"On a litter? No! What's the row? A deader—eh?"

"Look a-hyar, Denny! You're a good man?"

"Waal, I allow to hold my own as men go."

"Will ye stand at my back in a job that's goin' to take nerve, I reckon, but that 'll be worth it in the end?"

"Try me! That's all I say."

"You'll smell burnt powder before you're through."

"But it's the glint o' gold I'm gettin' through the smoke—eh?"

"More than ye ever had in yer life, if we make the rifle."

"That's enough! I knowed my luck was a-comin' to me. I drawered to a straight flush to-night, an' fetched it the fust clatter! That thar allays means deuced good-luck, ur thunderin' bad."

"Waal, it'll be good-luck ef one or both of us don't git slung cold before we git through with it."

"We all have to take them chances. When it comes my turn to take a high lot, I allow to answer to my name as sassy as the next one."

"Come on, then."

"I'm a-follerin' of ye, boss."

"Keep close, an' don't make no row."

"Whist it is!"

And without knowing, or indeed caring, into what villainy he was being led, this pliant tool followed in his master's footsteps.

Joe Moran had meanwhile been weighing the probabilities.

"Ef he had been dead, thar wouldn't 'a' been no use in packin' him into camp," he soliloquized. "Whar then is the best place to take a galoot with his skin full o' holes? The widdy Reilly's?"

This was an easy guess, since the widow's kindness of heart and her skill as a nurse were equally well known.

"Denny," he asked, "kin ye face the widdy?"

"The widdy Reilly?"

"We're goin' to pay our respects to her ladyship."

"Worse luck! She has taken a dislike to me."

"Some o' your nonsense, I reckon."

"Waal, I was remarkin' how young an' handsome she kept; an' as a matter of course—You know how it is yourself."

"Of course."

"So she wiped me a back-bander, that my knowledge-box hain't got over ringin' yet."

"You have my sympathy. Ha! ha! ha!"

"If it is fair words you're goin' after, then, I allow I ain't yer best man."

"We ain't on a honeyfuglin' errand this trip; an' don't ye furgit it!"

There was a significant emphasis in the crispness with which Moran bit off this last clause.

Denny caught it up at once.

"Eh?" he exclaimed, sharply.

"We're goin' on business—pressin' business!" said Moran with a dogged resolve.

"She'd be the devil in a scrimmage!" protested Denny.

"We'll have to take the devil out of her, then. But cheese it!"

They were approaching the shanty; and Moran was afraid of being overheard.

He struck a match; and shading it with his hands so that it cast a light on the ground, but was otherwise pretty effectually screened, he

passed rapidly across the road, scanning the dust narrowly.

"Do ye see that?" he cried, exultantly, holding the light for an instant above the well-defined trail of the brush litter.

"It's the marks o' the saplin's—that's plain enough," assented Denny.

"Well, ye'll find that they don't pass the widdy's door."

However he passed on beyond, followed by his satellite.

Once more he went through the maneuver, when they had got a few steps the other side of the shanty.

"And now ye don't see it," he said, as his rapid examination failed to find the scratches in the dirt.

"Not a mark," whispered Denny in reply.

Extinguishing the match with a flint, Moran stood up in the dark.

"Have you got a nose-wiper?" he asked.

"The which?" cried Denny.

Not that he was in any doubt as to what was wanted; but his tone indicated that he thought such a demand preposterous.

"We must cover up our mugs somehow," said Moran. "It won't do to be spotted by the old girl."

"Hold on, Joe. Shouldn't you ought to let me into this thing a little more? If I'm to go it blind, it'll be at your risk."

"I should think that you ought to drop by this time."

"Maybe I'm a lunkhead; but blow me if I twig you yet!"

"The stiff's in yonder?"

"Yes."

"Waal, you are green!"

"What's the row now?"

"What would he be in there for if he was a stiff. I'd like to know?"

"That's so," admitted Denny, scratching his head at his own stupidity.

"And what would we face the widdy for, if it wasn't to—"

"Jump her claim."

"After which we natterally don't want her to be able to blow on us."

"A piece o' coat-linin' will fix that."

Acting on his thought, Denny reached inside of his coat, and without more ado produced the material for a mask.

The garment thus mutilated made but slight protest, the fabric being rotten with age. From an esthetic point of view it lost nothing, since the spoliation only left one rag less to flutter.

Tearing off two strips and tying them to adjacent corners, he passed them over his ears, and knotted them behind his head, so that the black patch veiled his face from just below his eyes.

Joe Moran drew from his pocket a black-silk handkerchief, such as is worn at the throat of a woolen shirt, after the fashion of sailors. With it he hid the lower part of his face, and the two worthies were ready to "face the widdy."

A dim light faintly illuminated the white curtain that was drawn before the one window, which flanked the door of the shanty. Mrs. Reilly had set the candle in a corner and screened it with a shawl thrown over the back of a chair, so that there would be light enough for the purposes of a sick-room without disturbing the wounded man, should the profound sleep into which he had sunk lighten.

"There's no knowin' what sort of a customer we'll find in thar," said Moran.

"The chap as fetched in the carcass?"

"Yes."

"I allow we're good fur any one man, and the widdy thrown in."

"We don't want no noise, if it can be helped."

"Eight inches o' cold steel is about the thing."

"But if the widdy's alone, it won't be necessary to hurt her."

"Who'd have the heart?"

"You're ready?"

"Let 'er go!"

"Keep step with me, as if there was but one of us."

"All right."

And with their bowies drawn and their revolvers ready at hand, they advanced to the door of the shanty.

Moran knocked, neither cautiously nor peremptorily, but about as he thought one who had the right to enter, yet was aware of the sick man, would demand admittance.

Sounds of some one stirring immediately came from within; and then the voice of the widow close to the door asked, guardedly:

"Is that you, Colonel Dangerfield?"

If instead of taking it for granted that Iron Despard had returned in pursuance of some afterthought, she had demanded:—"Who's there?"—she would have given Joe Moran a chance to exercise his ingenuity. As it was, she told him whose voice he must imitate in replying simply:

"Yes."

The name of Iron Despard was a shock to him. He was not prepared for so formidable an antagonist. But, as we have said, he was no coward; and obstacles in his way, so long as

they were not uncanny, only moved him to obstinacy. On the heels of the thrill of apprehension, then, swept a wave of savage determination; and that imparted to his voice something of the imperiousness of the man he sought to personate.

On the other hand, prepossession and disinclination to stand athwart Iron Despard's exacting temper made Mrs. Reilly uncritical; and hardly waiting for the answer, she hastened to open the door.

The moment it was ajar Joe Moran thrust his foot in, and his body followed as it swung back, so that he had clutched the widow's shoulder before she fairly saw him.

"Hist!" he sibilated. "One sound out o' yer head, an' I'll slit yer gullet fur ye!"

The point of his bowie, almost in contact with her neck, enforced his threat in a way that admitted of no misunderstanding.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORMING OF "FORTRESS REILLY."

Now the widow Reilly was a woman, but not one of the kind that shrieks at a mouse running over her foot. She never fainted; she never went into hysterics—with *fright*. In the lamented Mr. Reilly's time she had shown that she could kick and scream with the best of them when her physical strength was not quite equal to the demands of her temper. But what she lacked in competition with a man she made up in pluck and quickness. Indeed, no one had ever daunted her courage save Reilly aforesaid, when he used to beat her with a pick-belve, or anything else that might come handy.

Since she laid him away in the odor of sanctity, she had acknowledged no master; and now when, with the hem of her dress-skirt pinned up about her waist and her sleeves rolled above her elbows, she set her arms akimbo, planting her fists on her hips in battle array, it was her boast that "she'd loike to see the spalpeen that would put his fut an her neck!"

She saw that the man she admitted was not Colonel Dangerfield; she felt his clutch on her shoulder; his mask, his bowie, his threat—all flashed upon her at once. Instead of leaping back, as he no doubt expected, and for which he was prepared, she gathered herself, crouching, and then plunged against him, forward and upward, with the force of a battering-ram, almost lifting him off his feet.

But for the fact that his "backer" was indeed just at his back, our doughty assailant of Fort—or shall we say *Fortress*?—Reilly would have been shot through the door, to land on the broad of his back in the street.

As it was, Denny was knocked off his pins and hopelessly demoralized, for at least long enough to enable the garrison to barricade ready for a siege; but Moran recovered in time to interpose his foot and prevent the door from closing.

However, it was pressed on the other side by a shoulder nowise light, so that the creaking of its joints showed that he owed no slight debt of gratitude to the stout sole of his brogan.

With a smothered oath he put his shoulder in opposition to the widow's; but he had to make a second effort, straining his muscles to the utmost, before he succeeded in forcing her from her position.

Then, alas!—for him—she abandoned it so abruptly and unexpectedly that, as the door flew open, under the impulse of his weight, he plunged headlong into the room, tripping over the sill, and falling upon one hand and knee.

Meanwhile the widow had retreated across the room at a bound, and snatched a revolver from the table.

"Hands up!" she cried, in a ringing tone of command, that proved that she had the qualification for a voter which is usually denied to women—the ability to emphasize her ballot, if need be, with a bullet.

Joe Moran looked up to see her weapon pointed, not at him, as he expected, but over his head.

"You've got me, ma'am!" he heard at his back.

The voice was Denny's; and the tone was that of a man who knew when to cry:

"Enough!"

In blank astonishment Moran turned his head so as to look over his shoulder.

He saw his coadjutor framed in the doorway, with his hands above his head in a way familiar enough ever since '49.

"About face, and hold your position!" commanded Major-General Reilly.

And Denny obeyed as if the order came from "a real man."

Standing in plain sight, with his back to her, he was securely disposed of.

He was tied up, as a burro is "hitched" by throwing a jacket over his head with his ears thrust up the sleeves.

"And now I am ready for *you*!" cried the amazon, turning her weapon upon the astonished Joe.

All this had been done so quickly that he had not had time to recover before she "had the drop on him."

"Get up out o' that!" was her command.

He obeyed her perforce.

"What if the jade has the gumption to hold us prisoners until morning?" was his rueful reflection. "Hang that Denny! Why don't he jump away into the darkness while he has the chance?"

But if Denny was missing opportunities, Major-General Reilly was not.

"Keep them hands where they belong!" she ordered. "I'd hate to spoil so brave a fellow as you!"

He had to swallow her sneer as he held his hands duly above his head.

Through so much disturbance, which had not been great, Bob Cady had slept without break.

Consideration for him governed Mrs. Reilly's further action.

"If it wasn't fur wakin' a sick man," she said, "I'd hold you two gamecocks until I fetched the whole camp here to admire your peculiar style o' beauty. As it is, I mean to know the head man in this thing when I see him again. Let down one hand so as to pull that rag off your face. But mind you, none of your tricks on travelers! I don't stand no nonsense—remember that!"

At first this demand was a shock to Joe. But from where he stood he could see that his betrayed partner was alive, though sleeping heavily from prostration. Not knowing how critical his state was, he reflected that when he awoke he would reveal the name of his would-be murderer, if he had not done so already; and therefore it would not make his own case any worse to show his face. Indeed, he was lucky to get off so cheaply.

"Much good may it do you!" he growled, as he brushed the handkerchief down off his face, so that it hung round his neck.

"It's as ugly a mug as ever I see!" was Mrs. Reilly's compliment, delivered with a snap of the eye which showed that she longed to "get hold of him."

"Ugly or handsome, it is at your service."

"What do you call yourself?"

"You want to know that too! You're mightily interested."

"It's for no love of you! You may set that down!"

"Well, if your curiosity lasts till morning, you kin ask that galoot you've got thar."

"It's you that served him so, is it?"

Her eye was on the bloody bowie which Moran still held in his hand above his head.

Moran grinned derisively.

"It's a beautiful color, ain't it?" he asked.

"I was comin' fur more of the same."

"Which you'll not get here!" declared Mrs. Reilly. "I've a mind to plug you, you bloody murderer!"

"Oh! you'd not be so wicked!" exclaimed Moran, banteringly.

He suddenly conceived the scheme of leading her into a battle of words, on the chance of catching her off her guard long enough to snatch his revolver and get in a first shot. That was all he asked!

Meanwhile he was not afraid of her executing her indirect threat. She was a woman, and consequently averse to taking blood on her hands, unless driven to it in self-defense. He understood the sex well enough to know that.

As for himself, he laughed at such scruples. Even that she was a woman, was nothing to him. Give him his shot!

Mrs. Reilly, who was as hot-headed as she was warm-hearted, seemed to take the bait.

"Wicked!" she repeated, scornfully. "When you—you coward!—have broken into my house to murder yau poor boy that can't lift his ban' to his head, he's that weak! If it was only for that, I'd let daylight through you that the doctor couldn't stop up! But it'd be black blood that I'd have on my hands, if I spared Judge Lynch the trouble of giving you your deserts!"

"An' what a pity it would be to dirty them lily-white hands!"

"Come!" cried the lady, "I don't want no lip out o' you! Take yourself out o' here before you'll be wakin' him as it's no thanks to you if he isn't past all wakin' in this world."

"I'm loath to leave you, my beauty!" declared Joe, with a mock sentimental leer.

But Mrs. Reilly, who, her bile once stirred, would not have declined the gauntlet under ordinary circumstances, remembered her "boy," and restrained her natural disposition to show that the tongue that could talk her down never yet wagged in any man's head!

But she knew that she could not trust herself too far. If she meant to withstand temptation, she must bring the discussion to a speedy close. So she cried, brusquely:

"Come! out you go! 'Bout face!"

"Hold on, Mrs. Reilly," said Moran in a conciliatory tone. "Maybe you and I can make terms that'll stand us both in hand."

"Terms!" cried the outraged woman.

"Terms, with a murderer?"

Her eyes blazed with honest indignation, and a white circle settled about her compressed lips.

"Go out of here! Go out of here!" she repeated, with suppressed passion, so intense that Moran saw that he had overreached himself.

"Go out of here, before I do you a mischief!"

It was the woman resenting a personal insult now. All else was forgotten.

Moran had sense enough to see that in this mood she was more dangerous than in any other.

He was fain to take himself off while he could do so with a whole skin!

So this was the issue of the storming of Fortress Reilly. The assailants marched off the field with their arms and munitions of war; while the victorious defender of the stronghold closed and barred the sally port, and then—oh, inconsistency of woman! must we confess it?—sat down and cried with vexation and nervous reaction!

Nevertheless the thing of real importance was secured. Bob Cady slept life-giving sleep, thanks to Major General Reilly! Long may she lead on to victory the petticoat brigade!

The discomfited allies found themselves once more in the darkness, Joe feeling not the less savage in that Denny was disposed to regard their defeat in the light of a very good joke.

"A great man you are!" growled Moran, "standin' thar in the door when you could have jumped into the darkness as easy as not!"

"With a hole in my back! No, thank you!" objected Denny.

"Bother! You know that she had only one weepin', an' with that she held the drop on me."

"I knew it! Do you fancy I have eyes in the back of my head? And how would I have bettered you any by running away?"

"You couldn't have turned, I suppose, the minute you were out of her sight, and plugged her through the doorway?" cried Moran, with a withering sneer.

"Thar's something in that," admitted Denny, scratching his head reflectively.

"I should say so!" cried Joe.

"Waal, it's too late now; but it will serve for next time," suggested Denny quite cheerfully.

"I suppose any time will suit you when it comes to collectin' yer pay," said Joe, by way of seeing if the shoe would fit the other foot.

"I'll wait till I earn it!" returned Denny, with a touch of asperity.

It was a hint that he had been crowded about far enough.

Moran muttered inaudibly.

Denny demanded no greater concession, and preserved silence.

They went toward the center of the camp, Moran reflecting on what to do next. It was plain that nothing was to be accomplished on the scene of their late encounter.

Suddenly the door of the Golden Serpent was burst open, and a crowd of men poured forth, shouting and discharging revolvers.

"A row!" cried Denny, with the delicious thrill which the small boy—and some "of a larger growth," as well!—experiences at the first indication of a dog-fight.

He was on the point of springing forward so as to be in the thick of it, when Moran caught him by the arm, and restrained him.

"That we have nothing to do with!" he said, decidedly.

"But didn't you see the squad that was ahead?" cried Denny, excitedly, "three or four of 'em! The others run 'em out."

"I did see 'em," said Moran; "and one of 'em is a man that we're after."

"That we're after? Who's that?"

"Iron Despard."

"And what do we want of him?"

"What did the widdy say, when I knocked?"

"Blow me, but I disremember!"

"Didn't she say: 'Is that you, Colonel Dangerfield?'"

"That's so, she did!" cried Denny, admiring his companion's shrewdness.

"Then who dragged Bob Cady into camp on a brush litter?"

"Dangerfield, of course. That's as plain as twice two. But look a-hyar, Joe! I thought you was standin' in with Cady."

"I don't care what you think, if you will only keep your mouth shut. They're comin' this way!"

And Moran dragged his subordinate close under the wall of a shanty.

He had been warned, not by sight, but by hearing. The footsteps approached until they were directly opposite the spot where the two worthies were secreted. Then they stopped, and the strained eyes of those in ambush could just make out four dark shadows which ceased to be distinguishable the moment they were no longer in motion.

In the dialogue which followed, already known to the reader, Joe Moran learned the name of the man that was forming against him, and which he must fight his way to the door and mine.

He have seen how fortune placed him at the mercy of a woman. He was now to show that the opposition of three of the best men in the mines could not daunt him.

He set his teeth with dogged resolve. Let them pile up their force. He was ready to fight to the death!

As for Denny, his hair seemed to raise on end at the prospect of such an encounter. He "passed" without looking at his hand!

In the midst of it all a dog came pattering up

to the skulkers; and Moran was so enraged at the prospect of being betrayed by the brute that he did the worst thing possible under the circumstances—prodded the animal with his bowie.

The dog sped away with yelps of pain and terror, as we have narrated; and in an instant Iron Despard strode fearlessly over to discover the cause of his alarm.

Moran knew that it was he, by his voice; and in pursuance of the theory of fighting which insists on the importance of getting in the first blow, he resolved to rid himself of one whom he believed to be his most formidable foe.

When Iron Despard seemed so near that his revolver must almost touch him, he fired, and then crouched down.

This maneuver was in anticipation of the rush of Dangerfield's three friends. As his first "meat" fell headlong almost upon him, he resolved to fight it out on the spot. He could drop one more before they discovered him. Then with Denny at his back, he would stand man to man with the other two.

But Denny—alas, Denny! To him Tiger Dick, Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport were giants of prowess. It was madness to think of coping with them for an instant. They were after him in a body. He would not have feared less a company of mounted "regulars." He fled incontinently!

This unexpected desertion necessitated a complete change in Joe Moran's plans. He could not hope to fight the three alone, even had they been ordinary men. He knew the men he had to deal with well enough to be aware that the flash of his next shot would make him a target for the fatal aim of either Tiger Dick or the Sportive Sport. He was not so anxious to die as to thrust himself wantonly in the way of their bullets.

"Curse the coward!" was the execration he ground between his teeth, careful to let no sound pass that barrier and betray him.

At the same time he realized that Denny's flight would be his protection.

But it would not do to let him be caught too quickly, though Moran was so exasperated that he would not have turned his hand over in defense of the recreant knave. So for his own advantage, as the Sportive Sport passed him, he thrust out his foot and tripped him.

The next instant Tiger Dick thundered by in hot pursuit, as he supposed, of the man who had shot down his friend.

Joe Moran slid round the corner of the shanty at right angles to the direction of the chase, and glided away in the darkness—with Shadow Jim close at his heels, moving with that wraith-like noiselessness of tread which had given him his name.

Denny fled like a hare; but he found that Tiger Dick was a bad man to "shake."

The Tiger wanted to take his man alive. It was his practice never to take a life when his end could be secured without it. This was from no particular scruples touching the sanctity of life, but because he held it a matter of principle to accomplish everything with the least possible expenditure of force.

"Halt, or I fire!" he shouted after the fugitive.

But Denny had before the eye of his fancy—capture, Judge Lynch, a running noose and "a high lot." So much seemed "a dead sure thing," since he would be arraigned as accessory to the attempted murder and robbery of Cady, and an accomplice in the assault upon Mrs. Reilly and the shooting of Iron Despard. Compared with this, the chance of a running shot in the dark, even at the hands of Tiger Dick, was a bagatelle. So he only lifted his heels the more quickly, hoping to lose himself among a cluster of shanties which stood in the heart of the camp.

Tiger Dick followed until he saw that longer delay would risk the loss of his man. Then he fired, throwing his "meat" in a heap.

Denny never uttered a sound after the bullet struck him!

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST "STIFF."

Now Shadow Jim did not pretend to be a fighting man. The one aim of his life was never to do anything which would put him in the grip of the law. Much more, then, was he careful not to expose his precious person to the rude clutch of Judge Lynch.

But when it came to trailing a man, Jim was an adept. It was a passion with him. To have failed, even under the most disadvantageous circumstances would have been a humiliation.

So now he followed this shadow, gliding along after it as noiselessly as a cat. When it advanced, he advanced; when it stopped, he stopped. His ear was so delicate that he kept perfect time with Moran's footsteps, and never took a step after Joe had paused. Besides, he had a cat-like vision in the dark; and constant training had made him able to read the significance of movements which would have escaped another man altogether.

As soon as Moran discovered that Denny had

led the chase after himself, he turned and crept back, to ascertain whether his shot had been effective.

This doubling would have caught any other man than Shadow Jim; but he flattened himself against the side of the shanty, and let Joe pass so near that his hand almost touched Jim's clothes.

When the Sportive Sport gathered his scattered wits sufficiently to pick himself up and see that he was all there, he found himself in silence and—as he supposed—solitude. All of his late companions had passed from sight—which was no wonder!—and bearing,—which certainly showed great expedition.

As he stood up and listened in not a little astonishment, he heard a pistol-shot at some distance; and then all was still again.

A groan close at hand recalled him to Iron Despard's misadventure; and turning round he stooped so as to bring his hand close to the ground, and so groped his way until it came in contact with a motionless body.

"By Jove! this is bringing our scheme to an abrupt terminus!" he exclaimed. "If he has killed—"

But even as he spoke the fallen man writhed under his hand.

"Maybe they haven't bowled us out yet!" he cried, with an exultant thrill.

Straightway he struck a match and held it over the face of his colleague.

Iron Despard lay on his back with his eyes staring wide open. They were fixed upon the flame of the match, but with no intelligence in them. He was dazed—but a long way from dead!

"Hallo, old fellow!" cried the Sportive Sport, gayly, "what does all this mean? You're not crying quits so soon, are you?"

And grasping him by the shoulder, he shook him lustily.

Iron Despard turned his eyes upward from the flame of the match to the face of his friend. They had the questioning look of one whose wits are still wool-gathering; but gradually intelligence began to dawn again in them, and with a sudden start he sprang to a sitting posture, just as the match went out, leaving them in Stygian darkness.

Here was a fine chance for a desperate struggle at cross-purposes, but that the Sportive Sport had the wit to see the danger, and cried out:

"Hold on, pard! Don't mistake me for an enemy!"

Iron Despard recognized the voice and as he gathered himself up asked:

"Has the scoundrel escaped?"

"I wish I was in condition to tell you!" laughed the Sportive Sport. "I must have tumbled over your body. Anyway, here I am with a new cranial development not down on any of the charts, in the shape of a bump on my forehead as big as a hen's egg, and no better informed as to the fate of the rest of our party than you are. Friend and foes, they may have gone up into the air, or down into the ground, for aught that I can say to the contrary!"

"What! have I been unconscious?"

"Well, I should say so, my friend!"

"But how long?"

"Now you are too much for me!"

"You surely—"

"Have been taking a snooze along with your excellent self, it seems! It's the force of example. Ha! ha!"

"But you were not—"

"With this lump on my forehead? I should say that I was!—and with good cause too! Pray, what do you think my head is made of?"

It was plain that the Sportive Sport was not disposed to treat the matter seriously.

"But tell me," urged Iron Despard, "have you heard nothing?"

"Nothing. But I have seen enough to make up for it—the most brilliant display of shooting stars— But stop! To be exact, I have heard something too. A pistol-shot, just after I got on my legs again."

"But no scuffling or outcry?"

"Nothing of the kind. The shot—"

"Hush! Some one is approaching!"

Iron Despard dropped his voice to a whisper, and clutched the arm of his companion.

At that moment the footsteps ceased, and a succession of mellow notes like the call of a night bird broke on the air.

"Ah! that is Tiger Dick!" said Iron Despard, as he recognized a signal arranged between them in their past association.

He answered it at once.

The sound of approaching steps was renewed; and the remark of the Sportive Sport showed how delicate was his sense of hearing.

"He is carrying something," he observed at once.

"How do you know that?" asked Iron Despard, as they went forward to meet their colleague.

"His step lacks the spring natural to a man of his make-up when carrying only his own weight."

Before any further words could pass they came up with the person under discussion.

"Well, gentlemen, here we are again!" said Tiger Dick, cheerfully.

As he spoke he threw down a heavy burden, which in the gloom they could just perceive that he had been carrying on his shoulders.

"What have you there?" asked Iron Despard, not however without some suspicion of the truth.

"Our fine eavesdropper," answered Tiger Dick, carelessly. "He is spoiled for further usefulness in that direction!"

"Dead?"

"I wasn't in the humor to shoot for sport. I was afraid that he had downed you for good and all."

"No thanks to him, probably, that he did not!"

"Well, he's past apologizing now."

"But where is your friend?"

"Shadow Jim?"

"I don't know that I ever heard his name."

"That's what he answers to. I expected to find him still with you."

"But you see he is not here. Can he have been frightened off?"

"You don't know him, my dear Despard."

"He seemed reluctant to join us."

"For some better reason than cowardice—you may depend on that."

"I am glad to hear it. But where is he now?"

"Of that I know no more than you; but I have faith to believe he will be able to give a good account of himself when he turns up."

"Thanks, friend Dick!" said Shadow Jim, mentally.

"At any rate, let us look this fellow over," suggested Iron Despard.

"That is what I brought him here for."

They struck a match and held it over the face of the dead man.

He was an evil-looking chap.

"He is a stranger to me," said the Sportive Sport.

"And to me," said Iron Despard. "But it might pay to go through his clothes. He may prove to be the man we are most interested in. That would account for his spying upon us."

While he acted on his suggestion, lighting a small dark-lantern to facilitate the work, Tiger Dick stood looking on with folded arms.

There was in his manner a reckless indifference to the fact that he had just extinguished a human life that caused the Sportive Sport to shrink from him with a sense of repulsion.

One cannot be over nice in the choice of associates in so wild a country as the mining-district of America, but Edward Haveland had never affiliated with a deliberate murderer.

Joe Moran might now have had another shot at the three partners; but his recent experience told him the extreme hazard of such a course, though it was hard for him to resist the temptation when Iron Despard's dark-lantern exposed to view so fair a mark.

It was lucky for him that he consulted prudence, for Shadow Jim had got in a position that brought Moran in a direct line with the light, and he would have discovered the slightest movement of hostile intent.

In that case he, of course, would not have withheld his hand and left his friends to be murdered.

Iron Despard's search was fruitless. The fellow had nothing on his person but an old clay pipe, a piece of plug tobacco, and a pack of greasy cards, not counting his weapons.

"It looks as if he was nothing but a bum, sleeping under the lee of this shanty," said the Sportive Sport.

He was thinking that there had been the useless sacrifice of a life.

"It's his hard luck, then," said Tiger Dick, indifferently. "If he had known me better, he would have stopped when I called to him. This will be a lesson to him!"

Iron Despard stood meditative, in such a position that without purpose he threw the light of his dark lantern over the Tiger.

The Sportive Sport studied the face thus revealed. There was a devil-may-care recklessness about it that it had not worn a year ago.

Iron Despard was now struck by the change which, absorbed as he was in his own bitter thoughts, had thus far escaped him.

Abruptly he closed his lantern, saying coldly:

"What shall we do with this carcass?"

"Leave it where it is," said the Tiger.

"Let us draw it out of the street at least," amended the Sportive Sport.

Seizing the man by the shoulders, he executed his own suggestion.

"Is it not strange that your friend does not make his appearance?" asked Iron Despard, evidently not at ease about Shadow Jim.

Tiger Dick read the cause of his solicitude about the little dandy, and in his direct way answered:

"I will be responsible for one thing. Your secret is safe with him. If he does not see fit to help us, he will at least not betray us."

"Oh! that of course," answered Iron Despard.

Nevertheless the Tiger had hit the nail on the head. His assurance was a relief.

"And now," pursued Iron Despard, "there is nothing left but to arrange for a meeting tomorrow; when I will bid you good-evening, and go for the doctor."

"Perhaps we had better go in a body," suggested the Sportive Sport. "The crowd you will have to face is not in a very kindly frame of mind."

"I have no apprehensions," said the intrepid man who had won the name of Despard the Duelist. "Good-evening!"

He turned and left them, striding forward with no faltering tread.

"It might be as well for us to be on hand in case of need," suggested the Sportive Sport to Tiger Dick.

"We can follow him and stay outside," agreed the Tiger.

This they acted upon, greatly to the chagrin of Joe Moran, who thought that he thereby lost a chance to creep after Iron Despard, drop him with a shot or a blow in the back, and get possession of the precious scraps of the cryptogram, without which what he had so treacherously gained would be of no service to him.

All of which shows how easy it is to be mistaken as to what is best for one, since an opportunity to attack Iron Despard would have laid Moran open to a bullet from Shadow Jim, otherwise withheld.

Meanwhile, could Shadow Jim have got speech with his friends and laid a trap for the capture of Moran, he would have done so; but while the latter was watching them this was impossible; so he was forced to be content to keep an eye on him, with a view to ascertaining and frustrating his plans.

Iron Despard went into the saloon fearlessly. The gambling-room being closed, he found all of the men in the bar. They frowned on him with no friendly eyes; but quite heedless of them, he ran his glance over the crowd in quest of Dr. Warren.

Discovering him, he walked straight up to him.

"I have some one in need of your services, if you will accompany me," he said.

"Ah! Dangerfield, how d'ye do?" cried the disciple of Esculapius. "Eh! a professional case? Certainly! One moment! A-ah—you won't have something before we go? No? Urgent case, of course. My dear fellow, the impatience of the unprofessional in these matters is without reasonable foundation, believe me. Think us hard-hearted—take our time, and all that—don't you? But, bless you! we know that a man don't die in a minute! There! now we are ready to give the old chap on the pale horse—the great leveler, you know—all the trouble we can. Is it possible that these playful fellows plugged one of your friends? I would have given odds against it, in the dark, so."

Iron Despard made no reply to this rattling mill-tail. He was willing to leave uncorrected the impression that the crowd caught from the doctor's lips. It might be of advantage to him to keep his connection with Bob Cady unknown.

The crowd took the bait like a shoal of gudgeons. Broad grins, nudges, winks and a derisive murmur showed their satisfaction.

There was a general exodus from the saloon at the heels of the doctor and Iron Despard; but while curiosity carried them as far as the door, caution warned them against following into the darkness a man of the duelist's known character.

In the mines one lesson is pretty thoroughly taught—not to meddle in another man's affairs. Whoever does it, does it at his own risk, which is not inconsiderable.

Iron Despard would not have hesitated to check an unduly inquiring mind with a pistol bullet; and the traditions of the mining district would have held him so far blameless.

"It is perhaps enough for me to say that is not a matter of public interest," he said, as he approached Mrs. Reilly's house.

"Amplly, sir, amplly!" was sawbones's assurance.

The widow was now more wary; and at Iron Despard's summons she asked:

"Who is there?"

"It is I, Colonel Dangerfield," replied the applicant, a little impatiently, knowing of no reason for this increased caution.

The bolt was heard to shoot back; and then the widow's voice bade them:

"Come in!"

Iron Despard, angered by this apparent incivility, pushed open the door with some violence, and strode across the threshold with an imperious frown.

He discovered the widow standing in the middle of the room with a cocked revolver in her hand, and her eyes glittering with apprehension.

"Oh! I am so glad you have come!" she exclaimed, at sight of him.

As the reaction set in, she began to tremble and pant hysterically, and hurried forward as if to seize his hand.

One of the hated sex, he tolerated her because he could not dispense with her services as nurse. But he would not endure to have her whimpering about him. With a frigidity that effectually

checked any appeal to his sympathies, he demanded:

"What is the matter with you?"

"The house has been attacked by two masked men. It's a God's mercy that I have not been killed!" cried the widow.

A ring of resentment in her voice added—"in your service!"

"Tell me all about it," said Iron Despard, without manifesting any disturbance.

He listened quietly to the widow's account delivered with the pithy sententiousness of a woman who felt that she had a right to a more sympathetic hearing.

"I have brought the doctor to your patient," was his only observation, when she had concluded.

It was a standing joke with Dr. Warren that he could never go without the instruments for healing wounds so long as his friends never went without the instruments for making them; but as the climate was too healthy for any one to fall sick, and no one was ever permitted to die of old age, a doctor's complete outfit in that delectable country might easily be included in a combination jack-knife.

So now he spread out his case of shining lancets and probes and scissors with the deftness acquired by constant practice; and throwing off his coat, fell to work over his patient with a firmness and precision of movement that left nothing to be desired. The readiness with which Mrs. Reilly seconded his efforts showed that this was no new office to her; and soon between them they had the ugly wounds washed and court-plastered and bandaged in the most approved style.

"Well?" asked Iron Despard, when the work was done.

"My dear sir," replied the doctor, "he is in the hands of the Lord and Mrs. Reilly! He couldn't be in better."

"But what is the prospect?"

"That only time can tell."

"The case is precarious? You can decide that much?"

"He is hard hit indeed. To be frank with you, I should be loth to exchange places with him."

"Naturally!"

Dr. Warren looked up with an expression of surprise, and then said:

"Ah, yes! I see. Of course you cannot be expected to look at it from our scientific point of view. It is a beautiful case, I assure you. I shall take great interest in watching its development."

"Will it be safe to speak to him when he wakes?"

"Perfectly—if you have a burial-plot picked out for him."

"Otherwise?"

"I should advise that no one but his nurse be allowed access to him. She is well enough informed to head off any recurrence to painful themes."

"Thank you. He shall not be disturbed. See that nothing is left undone that will favor his speedy recovery, and look to me as pecuniarily responsible."

He then turned to Mrs. Reilly.

"You seem so well able to take care of yourself," he said, "that it is perhaps unnecessary to offer you a protector."

"Oh! don't trouble yourself about me!" said the lady, rather crisply.

He bowed after the manner of one who did not care to urge the point, and taking her at her word held open the door for the doctor to precede him.

He declined a tender of hospitality from the latter; and they parted company before the shanty, the doctor setting out to reconnoiter the camp for some boon companion to take a "night-cap" with him before turning in.

If this "last man" could be induced to accompany him to his office, to still further protract the night with "a quiet game of draw," he would find it a room with floor, walls and ceiling of bare pine boards, not even mill-dressed and just large enough to contain a narrow bunk, a packing-box (which served as table, wine-cellar and receptacle for soiled linen) three stools and a chair (the former being empty kegs and the latter a lemon-box, of which the partition in the middle served as a seat, while one end had been knocked out and the sides curved so as to form a chair-back by nailing them to a barrel-hoop), and last, but by no means least in importance, as was indicated by its size, that most primitive of cuspidors, a box filled with sawdust.

Iron Despard was reflecting on Mrs. Reilly's narrative. By cross-questioning he had learned from her as accurate a description of her patient as she could give. By searching Drury he had got, through the sense of touch, almost a good idea of his make-up as he could have got by sight—such is the power of the habit of close observation. He now thought that he saw a correspondence between one of her descriptions and the man Tiger Dick had shot. To assure himself, he resolved to take Drury's coat to her for identification.

Going to the spot where they had left it, he had no difficulty in finding the body. But

while he was removing the garment, he suddenly received a stunning blow on the head from some one standing within the shadow of the shanty under the wall of which the compassion of the Sportive Sport had moved him to drag the dead man.

The next instant his assailant precipitated himself upon him and bore him to the ground. Then to his dazed senses hell seemed suddenly to burst open and pour its flames and demons over and about him!

CHAPTER XI.

JEALOUSY.

As the crowd followed Tiger Dick and his friends out of the gambling saloon, Adam Farley picked the Golden Serpent up in his arms, bore her through a doorway, up a flight of steps, and into a room on the second floor.

The room, overlooking the street through the windows, was a sleeping apartment of good size. There was a carpet on the floor, and pictures hung against the walls. The furniture was made of pine, but was tastefully covered with gay-colored chintz, ruffled and plaited, so that the wood was nowhere in sight. Everywhere were traces of a woman's deft touches.

Farley laid his unconscious burden on the bed and then proceeded to pace the room with a very ugly look on his face.

He seemed no way concerned about the state she was in, but waited until she recovered of her own accord.

Presently she opened her eyes, and then sprung up with a gasp, and looked about in bewilderment.

He confronted her with folded arms and a face like an iron mask.

"Well, madam?" he said, his nostrils dilating and quivering with passion.

She pushed back her hair, which, being heavy, had escaped from its confinement, and fell rippling over her shoulders like a cascade of silk floss.

As yet she had not collected her thoughts; but against his frown of displeasure, all the woman of her nature arrayed itself in arms. Without asking herself what it meant, she slipped from the bed and backed away from him against the wall, standing in an attitude of defiance.

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?" he demanded, fiercely.

"What should I say?" she asked.

"I leave that to your ingenuity," was his sneering retort.

"Excuse me! I do not see why I should so tax myself for your benefit," she answered, nothing behind him in firmness.

"Then you think I will accept the scene of a moment ago?" he cried, his rage bursting forth like an eruption of lava.

She took another quick step in retreat, lifting her hand to her bosom. Her eyes scintillated. Her lips whitened. Her breath fluttered.

"A-a-ah!" snarled her accuser, advancing upon her with steps like a creeping panther's, while his head was thrust forward, his elbows crooked, and his fingers working, as if he were about to spring upon her and rend her with his nails.

"Stand back!" she cried, thrusting her hand into her bosom for her poniard.

It was not in its place. In fainting she had dropped it on the floor in the gambling-room.

Defenseless before his rage, she gradually sunk downward, until she crouched to the floor, never taking her eyes from his.

There was something terrible in the completeness with which she seemed to abandon herself to the conviction that she was to be murdered. It chilled the anger of Adam Farley with an indescribable fear. Her glittering eyes fascinated him. She seemed to lose the characteristics of a woman. Her attitude, her expression, were those of an animal driven to bay, but not defiant—only waiting its doom.

Had she cried out with a weak woman's piteous wail, he would have struck her down with a brute's ruthless fist. Had she fled from him, he would have caught her by her hair and dragged her to the ground. But this mute, white waiting for his coward's blow unnerved him. Her dilated eyes pierced down to the craven spot in his nature.

A power that he could not master restrained him when he got within a pace of her. He was afraid to put his hand upon her, lest her fiery heart burst with its sense of indignity.

Then his anger swelled again at his own weakness.

"Get up!" he commanded.

She did not move a muscle.

"Shall I take hold of you?" he shouted, advancing the last step, and reaching to seize her wrist.

She took her gaze from his eyes, and fixed it upon his hand, from which she slowly shrunk, panting and quivering in every nerve.

"Curse you for a fool!" he shouted, stamping his foot in fury. "Have you sunk into imbecility?"

And snatching up a chair that was within reach, he dashed it to the floor.

As he turned away from her and strode across the room, kicking everything out of his way,

she recovered herself with a long-drawn, tremulous breath, and rising, seated herself on the edge of the bed, clasped her hands in her lap, straightening her arms rigidly, and so sat, gazing fixedly at the floor.

He turned and looked at her in surprise. What was this new mood? She seemed to have quite forgotten him and his anger. He cooled off while he wondered.

Presently she spoke of her own accord. "You should have given me time," she said, quietly.

"Time for what?" he asked, with a sullen frown.

"To collect my thoughts."

"Well, have you had enough?"

"Yes, thank you!"

She looked up at him with a quick flash of the eye which showed that she could repay his sarcasm in kind if she chose.

"Then I suppose I shall be favored with the result of your reflections—of course at your convenience."

"What do you wish me to tell you?"

"I would not presume to dictate. Whatever you think the circumstances call for."

"You leave it to me?"

"Entirely."

"Well, then—"

She clasped her hands behind her head, and threw herself back upon her pillow with a yawn before she concluded:

"I think that the circumstances require that, to be frank, I should tell you, that in your present mood I find you very tiresome."

At that he frowned blackly, gnashing his teeth in impotent chagrin. He realized that the woman, so frail that he could snap the thread of her life with one grip of his powerful hands, had regained full self-possession, and resumed the sultana-like sway with which she ruled him.

"Who is that fellow, and what is he to you, or you to him?" he demanded.

She was not now disturbed by his passion. She lifted her foot to the bed, and seemed absorbed in a critical examination of the toe of her slipper.

"You are kind enough to imply that it is possible that I should be acquainted with a fellow," was all that she said.

"What has the man who broke the bank to-night been to you?"

"He once paid me the compliment of his admiration."

"You are frank about it," said Farley, livid with rage.

"But not through vanity, believe me," she retorted.

"And so you sold the bank out to him to-night?"

"Come! come! you are getting amusing!"

And she laughed gayly.

"I who am so clumsy with the cards that you will not let me try to cheat for you," she went on. "Even these half-tipsy miners would detect me!"

"Curse him! I will slit his throat!" snarled Farley.

"By all means!" she acquiesced. "Come! we will renew the first transports of our love, if you will bring me your knife with his blood on it!"

She looked at him through half-closed eyes, with a seductive smile.

With a sudden glow about the heart and fluttering breath he went over to her.

"Do you hate him?" he asked.

Then with a burst of fierce passion he seized her wrist, crying hoarsely:

"Swear it! swear it!"

"Was our interview such a one as is common between lovers?" she asked, soothingly.

"Between those who have been lovers!" he urged, fairly choking with the words; so fierce was his jealousy.

"We have never been lovers in the sense that you mean," she assured him.

"Swear it! swear it!"

He snatched from her bosom a wooden cross that hung about her neck by a gold chain. It was a religious relic, alleged to have been made of the stake at which one of the saints had been martyred. This he pressed against her lips.

She kissed it, smiling into his eyes the while; and then, locking her hands back of his neck, she drew his face down to hers and kissed him with the sweet, lingering caress of a woman who knows how to draw a man's heart through his lips.

With a surge of passion as fierce as had been his rage, he clasped her in his arms, showering kisses upon her, while he murmured in a choking voice:

"Gods! gods! how I love you! my sweet! my sweet!"

Then he sprang up, crying:

"Not yet! not yet! We must have his blood first!"

He turned to leave the room.

She waved him away with that siren smile which has sent many a man to crime.

"Don't be too long gone!" she called after him, in mellifluous accents, followed by a tender sigh that seemed to swathe his heart in a flame.

He ran back to her, and took her face between

his palms, while he gazed at her with a film before his eyes.

"No! no!" she cried, turning her face away.

And then she added, brokenly, almost in a whisper:

"Or—or I can't let you go; and you will lose the opportunity."

He laughed with a delight that was something akin to madness, and rushed from the room, extending his hands before him like one who gropes blindly.

She heard him descend the steps three at a time—heard his voice calling imperiously to the men below; and then, turning over on her face, clutching the pillow in a spasmodic embrace and setting her teeth in it, she was racked by an anguish of conflicting emotions, as if an iron hand were tearing her heart from her bosom!

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTURE.

ADAM FARLEY rushed into the saloon below shortly after the exit of Iron Despard and Dr. Warren.

He found the men in a state of excitement which made them ready tools for the execution of his purposes, only waiting a leader.

"Gentlemen," he began, "have any of you ever lost any money at this table?"

The men exchanged glances, and then laughed.

"Waal, Cap," said one who constituted himself spokesman for the rest, "I reckon thar mought be a purty fair showin' o' hands on that thar proposition, an' no doggone lyin' in it nuther!"

The general muttering, shuffling of feet, and shaking of heads showed that every one present had felt the claws of the tiger, at one time or another.

"Well, gentlemen, have any of you ever won?" pursued Farley, unmoved.

"Oh, yes!" the spokesman hastened to admit. "We've made the raffle off an' on, an' pocketed our lute with a smile."

"Thar's Billy Duffy kin speak fur one."

"Yes, yes, Billy. Come up to the scratch, ole man. It's your put-in."

"Give us a speech, Bill."

The gentleman thus addressed bung modestly back, though his admiring friends sought to push him forward into notice. He had once had a run of luck that had enabled him to go on a "stone" drunk for two weeks, treating the whole camp.

It is needless to say that the money ultimately all found its way back to the till of the Golden Serpent.

"That's all right, boys! Cheese it, do!" pleaded Mr. Duffy, bowing and grinning and freeing his garments from the hands that sought to pull him forward.

"I leave it to you, then, gentlemen, if the game played here has been a fair one," continued Farley.

"Thar never was a fairer—eh, boys?" was the appeal of the spokesman.

"Not in no camp that I ever was in!" declared one emphatically; and he looked about on his companions to confirm his indorsement.

They were prompt in this.

"I've piled my chips on every lay-out between the pearly an' the Golden Gate; an' I swar that the Sarpint gives a man the best show fur his money of any of 'em."

"We're all swarin' by the Sarpint, ye onderstand."

"Thank you, gentlemen! thank you!" said Farley, with feeling. "When a man has tried to do the square thing, it is gratifying to know that his efforts have been appreciated. I suppose it is the same with a woman. I happen to know that the Golden Serpent came into this camp with the resolve to see if a square game couldn't be run, and that she has never let any one in her employ take a cent from any man, drunk or sober, without giving him a full equivalent for his money. I therefore thank you in her name."

The men received this speech gravely; but one beyond the range of Farley's vision closed his eye significantly. It was as if he would say:

"Ad Farley's a fust-class chap, an' all that; but that thar's all understood, of course!"

The others "took it all in," but said nothing.

"You all saw how she was treated to-night," pursued Farley.

"A doggone shame!" shouted one of the men, striking the table with his fist.

The sentiment was heartily indorsed by all present.

"I believe the solid men of this camp are not disposed to pass over such an insult quietly," continued Farley.

He was not allowed to proceed until the crowd had shown its resentment.

"There are men," he went on, "who are no credit to any camp; and the sooner they are notified to git, the better for those they leave behind."

"Bounce 'em! bounce 'em!" was the cry, this being the proposition for which the men had waited.

Then the violent measures proposed on all

sides showed how ready these men were to exact blood on the slightest provocation.

"Hold on, gentlemen," said Farley, who wished to win a reputation for moderation. "If we warn these men to quit the camp—"

"A leetle taste o' hemp fust won't hurt 'em none!"

"We hain't had a hangin' bee fur a dog's age! I'll be shot ef I hain't most furgot how the thing goes!"

"That's so, gents. An' you've all hearn tell o' this man Iron Despard. Thar ain't a camp as he goes into but he makes trouble, fust ur last. I allow it 'ud be doin' a sarvice to every camp as he's likely to visit to rub him out now while we're at it."

"An' this Tiger Dick is a doggone sight worse. You know the close call he give Jim Farnsworth when he sent his deputy, Bragg up the flume?"

"But the Sportive Sport is as white a man as ye want to know," urged one.

The crowd was in no humor for moderate counsels, and the tenderer of this plea was pointedly snubbed.

Seeing this, Adam Farley still urged them to content themselves with giving the objectionable parties notice to "git!"

While the discussion was going on, the company received an acquisition in the person of Joe Moran.

He was yet bloody with the wounds received in his struggle with his partner, and looked wild with excitement.

"Gents!" he cried, "thar has been foul play in this hyar camp; an' I want yer help to right me an' my pardner."

The men crowded around him at once with eager curiosity, and plied him with a flood of questions.

Standing in their midst, and looking from one to another for sympathy which was yielded without stint, he told his story.

He told of the cryptogram, and how a few days before, being "a leetle how-come-ye-so," Bob Cady had dropped a hint of it to Iron Despard; whereupon he and Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport had secreted themselves in the shanty belonging to Bob and Joe, and fallen upon them as they entered.

"I managed to git out as you see me," he went on; "but I'm afraid that they've laid out pore ole Bob fur good. He jest got outside o' the door, when they bored him in the back. The last thing he done as his knees give way, was to reach the map out to me an' say:

"Ef you git away with it, Joe, remember my ole woman!"

"An' you did git away with her, by hokey!" shouted an excited miner, as exultantly as if he himself had a direct interest in the triumph.

"Show her up, boss!" was the eager request of another.

"Yes! yes! that's what we want to see. Trot out the map!"

This idea met with such general indorsement that it was plain the crowd had more curiosity about the map than sympathy for its despoiled owner. They thronged about Moran with an eagerness comparable only with a lot of bummers invited to take an all-hands-round.

But this did not suit Joe; so he waved them off with a knowing wink, saying:

"That's all right, boys! But yer uncle's lookin' out fur the map jest now, ye onderstand."

Then he resumed his narrative as if there had been no interruption.

"I reckon, now, he had the death grip on it; fur when I grabbed one end of it, he couldn't loose his holt, an' rip she went, a piece in my hand, and a piece in his'n. Then he plows the ground, an' I pulls out with my best licks. But, gents, I never would have fetched away my carcass, ef two of 'em hadn't got jammed in the door jumpin through after me. Once in the dark, a fool could give 'em the slip.

"Waal, I wa'n't givin' up my pard without another round; so I slied back, an' heared 'em chinnin' about the map. Betwixt the two of us, which nor t'other hadn't got enough to amount to anything without the rest.

"An' now up steps Mr. Iron Despard; an' what do you think he does? Oh, he's fly as they make 'em! He jest straddles that blind like smoke. All they've got to do is to keep the life into Bob, ef he ain't already clean gone, until they kin force him to make good their half. So they looks him over, and finds t'et he is worth totin' into camp; piles him on a litter, an' leaves him at the widdy Reilly's.

"I comes along. Billy Bowlegs is jest shuttin' up, with Cockeyed Denny the last man out. You all know Denny. Thar ain't a whiter man in this hyar camp."

Oh, yes! they all knew Denny; and though perhaps they had never before thought particularly about his qualities as a man, they now indorsed him with hearty unanimity.

"Waal," said Joe, solemnly, "he's a gonner! They jumped on us, an' fixed him! You maybe heared the shootin'."

What! Denny? Everybody suddenly became his friend and champion. The excitement and vindictive rage were like the flaring up of loose powder. They hardly waited to learn how and

why the shooting had been done. It was enough that Iron Despard and his crowd had done it.

All remembered bearing the shots, and every man in the room swore personal and implacable vengeance.

It only remained to plan the attack against so formidable a league as Iron Despard and his friends, so that not one might escape.

"Gentlemen," said Adam Farley, "while we are deliberating the matter, please to consider yourselves guests of the Golden Serpent. In behalf of the lady who is in the room over our heads, fairly ill with the treatment she has received at the hands of these ruffians, I will say that she does not forget that it is also to vindicate her that you have set out to hang her insulter and his gang."

He nodded to the barkeepers, who immediately bestirred themselves to supply all demands; and then seeing several bats come off preparatory to a rousing cheer, he lifted a warning hand, saying:

"Gentlemen! gentlemen! I need not remind you of the necessity of proceeding quietly. These men are the most desperate of their kind. We must surprise them, in order to take them alive for trial."

"Oh! we'll try 'em fast enough!" cried one with a significant look.

His meaning was caught up by the others, and expressed in laughs and shakes of the head which boded no good to the men against whom their hatred was directed. The forms—such as they were—of the summary court of Judge Lynch might be observed; but the prospective prisoners were condemned already.

"But, boys," said an evil-looking fellow, as he suspended his glass before his lips. "We ain't takin' no chances of their gittin' away, ye onderstand!"

And with interchange of savage glances the men came to a tacit understanding that, if a hasty shot precluded the necessity for a trial in any case, the judgment on which it was fired would not be seriously questioned.

Adam Farley called Moran aside; and after a short consultation between them, it was arranged that two parties should be selected, to be headed by them respectively—one to surround the shanty of the widow Reilly, to take Iron Despard when he made his appearance; and the other to proceed to the City Hotel, and secure Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport.

For this service only those who were sober enough to be manageable would be chosen, while those who were likely to prove noisy should remain in the bar of the Golden Serpent until they heard the sounds of an attack; when they should rush forth and rouse the camp, yelling to the top of their bent.

There was no cause for difference between the captains in the choice of parties, since Joe Moran wanted only Iron Despard, while Adam Farley was quite indifferent to all save Tiger Dick. Each privately resolved to avail himself of the slightest excuse to "let daylight through" his man with his own hand. If he failed in this, Moran would not hazard the chances of a trial even so informal and so little searching as the one contemplated; but with the indispensable half of the cryptogram once in his possession, he would "slope," leaving the denizens of Coyote to settle their share of the matter at their leisure, and to their own satisfaction.

All being instructed in the parts they were to play, they passed out into the darkness. Then a deep silence reigned without, and those left in the saloon held their breath in suspense.

The party under Adam Farley proceeded at once to the hotel—whither we will follow them presently.

As the body of Cockeyed Denny lay almost directly in his course to the shanty of the widow Reilly, Joe Moran thought that he would lose nothing by giving his party the testimony of their own eyes against the men whom they were going to call to summary account. He knew that there was nothing like the sight of blood to inflame the passions.

He found the body, and the men crowded forward to feel of it with low ejaculations of rage.

"Open a lantern," suggested one of them.

"Let's see the poor fellow."

But before this request could be complied with, Moran uttered a low warning, and pressed them all back.

Some one was approaching!

The firm, military tread electrified Moran. Where the slightest circumstance may turn the scale of life and death, it behooves a man to train all of his senses to constant observation. Therefore, without making a point of it, Joe Moran had learned to distinguish Iron Despard's step while following him from the scene of their encounter to the door of the Golden Serpent. He was now as sure of his man as if he could see him.

His followers were at his back as silent as shadows. He had not had time to instruct them of his purpose; but he trusted to their prompt seconding as soon as he made his attack. He longed to use the knife or the revolver; but for appearances' sake he must restrain himself for a time. He therefore reversed a pistol in his hand to administer a stunning blow.

Iron Despard came on steadily, until he bent

over the body and began to remove the coat—as we have said, to be taken to Mrs. Reilly for identification.

At this moment, the door of the City Hotel was opened by Adam Farley's party; and it happened that Iron Despard was directly in line, so that he was clearly outlined in a stooping posture.

Then Joe Moran made his spring.

A rush! a blow! a fall! a terrific struggle!—all in perfect silence!

Then, in an instant, a chorus of savage yells and a flood of light from several dark-lanterns; and Iron Despard is surrounded by a furious mob and seized by its myriad hands.

But he has Joe Moran by the throat with both hands, and is choking the life out of him. The face of the burly ruffian, purple with suffocation, is distorted into a grimace, the eyes protruding, the mouth agape. So painful is the iron grip that seems as if it were crushing the cartilages of his throat, that instead of trying to use his weapons he tears frantically at the hands that are strangling him.

Only a hoarse, wheezing sound issues from his throat as he strives to cry out to the crowd for help.

Against such odds the struggle is useless, but the man of iron will never relax a muscle. He is the impersonation of inflexible, deadly resolve—a human bulldog.

Then they clutch him on all sides, as many as can lay hold of his person—losing their grip and catching it again, falling over and under one another, giving and receiving wounds of which in their excitement they are unconscious, until, in their struggles to tear him from his victim, his clothes are nearly torn off of him and his joints nearly wrenched from their sockets. They beat him with fists and revolver butts, kick him, stamp upon him, until, covered with blood and dirt, he lies helpless and almost unconscious; while Moran, now released, sits apart, supported by his friends, gasping and swallowing with painful effort, with tears of strangulation streaming from his eyes.

It seems almost useless to bind him; yet they do it. Perhaps it is lucky for him. For when Moran recovers, he cannot well draw bowie knife or revolver on a man with his hands tied. He knows too that to administer the vicious kick to which his heart strongly inclines would prejudice him with some of the men there present, who hold that "fair play is a jewel."

No! Joe Moran was not fool enough to lose any points, in order to gratify useless spite. He had more profitable business before him.

His first care was to secure the remnant of the cryptogram. If he failed to find it on Iron Despard's person, he must go at once to the shanty of the widow Reilly, and search his partner's clothes—of course on the plea of getting safe possession of so valuable a document in the interests of the man who was unable to care for it himself.

He could even indulge a sort of savage humor, which, by the way, would serve to divert the men from thinking too closely about his motives.

"Excuse my familiarity, colonel!" he said, with mock politeness; "but, if you don't mind a kink in the golden rule, I am doing by you what you would like to do to me!"

The men laughed with him over this quip, as he went through Iron Despard's clothes with a dexterity that prompted one of them to remark:

"Seems to me, boss, that you go about it as handy as if you had had a good deal o' practice in that sort o' thing!"

This sally brought forth a renewed burst of hoarse guffaws, now at Joe's expense.

But he could afford to let them laugh. His laugh was in his sleeve, as he reflected on the trick he was playing them.

"That's all right, gents!" he replied, good-naturedly. "O' course most of ye know how it is yerselves! As fur me, I ain't complainin' so long as I make the raffle. An' hyar we are!—see?"

And he drew forth the fragments of the paper over which his betrayed partner had toiled through so many weary nights, to have the prize snatched from his grasp before it was fairly in it.

The men crowded about him with eager solicitations to be allowed to see what the map was like; but as before he coolly repulsed them.

"It's safe with yer uncle, boys—you bet!"

Then swelling with the full sense of his triumph, he drew from the breast of his shirt the remainder of the cryptogram, which he had gathered up on his return to the hut, and wrapped in a piece of dirty paper; and unwrapping the package and showing its contents to Iron Despard, while he added the scraps taken from him, he laughed:

"She's all thar, colonel! Don't ye wish ye had her?"

And returning it to his pocket, he slapped his breast with a chuckle.

"I don't bear yer no malice fur yer friendly leetle grip on my throat," he said. "You'll soon know how it is yourself; an' when I see ye dancin' on air, I'll know how ye feel, an' enjoy it all the more!"

But at this moment the sounds of a furious assault came from the City Hotel—pistol-shots, yells, the crash of glass, and the banging of doors; then men rushing madly about the house, shouting hoarse directions, and inciting one another to wilder effort.

The cries were such as are heard only in a human hunt.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MIGHTY CLOSE CALL.

THE door of the Golden Serpent having sprung ajar after Joe Moran, a fact which every one was too excited to notice, Shadow Jim had no difficulty in ascertaining what was going forward within, himself undiscovered.

The moment he learned that it was proposed to assail his friends he hastened to warn them.

His first care was naturally for his old partner, Tiger Dick; so he went directly to the City Hotel.

He found an exceedingly sleepy and, therefore, ill-natured clerk in attendance.

"Hello, pardner!" he cried, "what are the numbers of the rooms of Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport? Look alive, my dear fellow! I'm on business that can't wait."

"Who the deuce air you?" was the surly demand. "We ain't a-givin' the numbers o' gents' rooms to every scallawag as comes along."

Shadow Jim had no time to quarrel with this fellow. Even if he met with no opposition, the crowd might reach Iron Despard before he did.

He happened to have a quarter-eagle in his pocket. Like a trick in legerdemain it made its appearance in his hand and was transferred to the grimy paw of the clerk.

"That's all right, Johnny," he said, in a conciliatory tone, "but these gents are my pards, ye understand, and the City Hotel don't lose nothing by them—you know that, and—"

"Of course that makes a difference," the clerk hastened to say, as soon as he caught the glint of the gold. "When a gentleman comes along—"

"You was sayin'—which numbers?"

"Chin music" was at a discount with Shadow Jim just then—even the eloquence of a hotel-clerk.

"I'll jest show you the way," said that functionary, resolved to make up for his discourtesy to one who paid so well.

He had an eye to possible future harvests.

But on his present errand Jim preferred to dispense with attendance, though as a general thing you could not pile on the style too thick to suit him.

"Oh! don't trouble yourself!" he urged. "If you'll jest give me the numbers—"

"No trouble, boss. I hain't got nothing else to do."

And the now effusively obliging clerk was leading the way with most obsequious flourishes.

Jim stopped, and assumed an air of offended dignity.

"Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "Are you in the habit of keeping so close a watch over your guests when a gentleman comes to see them?"

"No offense, boss! I—"

"You were saying—what numbers?"

"Seventeen an' thirty-one, sir!"

"Thanks!"

And Jim passed on alone.

The City Hotel was an immense barrack, the sleeping rooms being partitioned off like the alcoves in a restaurant, with division walls a little higher than a man's head, which left the upper part of the building open to the rafters. Each room was large enough to contain a bunk bed similar to the berths on shipboard, and a stool or box to sit on. The bunk filled the length of the room, leaving a space equal to it in width, at one end of which was the door and at the other a window.

Each room was furnished with a wardrobe consisting of a row of nails driven into the wall. The impossibility of securing this with lock and key was never recognized as a drawback by the patrons of the house, since it was used only at night, when the owner of the clothes was on hand to guard them, and then only by such as were so effeminate as to prefer not to sleep in full dress.

The Sportive Sport was of this class; but he was not yet undressed when Shadow Jim knocked on his door. After drawing off his boots he had remained sitting on the edge of his bunk, reflecting on the enterprise in which he had enlisted, and on the company in which he found himself. His residence in the East had had its influence in softening his manners, and the possession of a wife made him more careful of himself. It thus happened that he was just throwing his suspenders over his shoulders when he was summoned to his door.

"What is wanted?" he asked.

"Sport, it is Jim Delany—Shadow Jim, you know," was Jim's introduction of himself. "Let me in! Be spry!—there's something in the wind!"

The Sportive Sport sprang to the door at once. He knew by the tone of voice that something of importance was impending. Of course

he would not be interrupted if there was not a demand for action; so, even as he opened the door, he rebuttoned his suspenders and caught up one boot. Promptness was characteristic of him, and was indispensable in the business which occupied his friends and him.

"Pard," said Jim, the moment he was in the room, "there was another man on deck when Iron Despard was so nearly wiped out—one that you didn't see. I got onto him and trailed him down fine. He has gone to the Golden Serpent and stirred 'em all up worse than a nest of hornets; and they're coming for you, boss—you and the Tiger. There's a pile of 'em, and they're red-hot! There's no chance for a stand. They'll use you up, sure. You've got to give them the slip, and wait for your chance to come back at 'em. It's no mere bounce, you understand. They're talkin' hemp! The fellow Joe—it's Joe Moran, by the way—has sung a different song from what Iron Despard gave us—of course a lie. He says that you three—Dick and Despard and you—laid for him and his pard an' used 'em up. Then he's give you the full benefit of that stiff out thar; an' the boys are just wild. Look out for yourself. I'm off for Dick."

While this explanation was being given the Sportive Sport was getting into his clothes with a celerity which showed that he was used to making the most out of a short space of time. When Shadow Jim had finished and bolted out of the door, he had but to seize his hat, and was at Jim's heels.

But at that moment the door of the hotel was thrown open, and a stream of men poured in.

Shadow Jim leaped back so abruptly that he collided violently with the Sportive Sport.

"No use, pard!" he cried. "There they are at the door. Slide up the window—mighty soft, now! Do you know Dick's room from the outside? It must be on this side of the house."

"No," replied the Sportive Sport. "I don't even know the number. What an oversight not to have learned it, when we were at any moment likely to want to know where to find each other!"

"It's thirty-one. We'll have to count the windows. Out you go—easy!"

The window had been got up without much noise. The Sportive Sport put one hand and one foot on the sill and leaped through, not knowing what he might alight into. Fortunately it was nothing worse than a muddy ditch, dug to carry the water away from the foundations of the house.

Jim slipped through with his usual noiselessness, letting down the window after him. Then he ran along the side of the house, counting the windows as he went.

While he and the Sportive Sport were making their escape, the hotel clerk was earning the quarter-eagle with which Shadow Jim had quickened his amiability; or rather—since his gratitude always looked forward instead of back—he was laying up a future claim on his generous patron by detaining the mob as much as he could without drawing suspicion upon himself.

As for the merits of the quarrel, he was philosophically indifferent to them. Furthering justice put no money into his pocket! It was a luxury he couldn't indulge in, when there was anything to be made in the other direction.

The moment he saw Adam Farley and his gang, he "dropped to the racket." So assuming a look of blank surprise that would have done credit to a son of the Flowery Kingdom, he stared at them open-mouthed, as if he were not yet half awake.

"Come! look alive!" cried Farley, sharply, yet with great caution. "We're after the men Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport! Which are their rooms? Are the ones next to them occupied?"

"Tiger Dick? The Sportive Sport?" repeated the clerk, as if thrown into a flurry by the business the men were on, and by their crowding about him and fixing their eager eyes upon him, while they stood with cocked weapons in hand.

He frowned and scratched his head, while he stared helplessly down the passage with doors on either side like the saloon of a steamboat.

"Well! well! where are yer ideas?" muttered one of the men, impatiently. "Do ye propose to keep us standin' hyar all night?"

At this the clerk, who was no coward, instant-flared up with offended dignity, whipping out his revolver with most business-like promptitude.

"Who's runnin' this hyar thing, By Huggins?—you ur me? That's what I want to know!" he cried, glaring at the offender. "Mebby you don't like my way o' doin' business; and mebby you've got the sand—"

But at this point Adam Farley interposed, just in time to prevent Huggins from "reaching" for the clerk.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he expostulated, springing between them and pushing them back with a hand on either breast. "This is no time for a quarrel! For God's sake, Huggins, be quiet! You will spoil everything!"

"No doggone son of a gun is a-goin fur to flourish his shootin'-irons in my face, ye understand!" almost shouted the enraged By, himself

swinging about a pistol half as long as his arm, in a way that made those in his vicinity dodge in every direction, and seek to ward off the danger of an accidental discharge.

Adam Farley was in despair. Every one in the hotel would be roused, Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport among the rest. Then the advantage of a surprise, on which he counted most, would be lost; they would make their appearance in the crowd of men coming from their rooms to learn the cause of the disturbance; it would be impossible to shoot into this crowd indiscriminately; and before they could be separated, men of their well-known address could easily make their escape.

The backer of the Golden Serpent therefore turned his back on the hotel clerk, and with both hands extended sought to prevent Huggins from shooting, and to back him off into the crowd, renewing his appeal:

"For God's sake, By!"

And then to the crowd:

"Gentlemen! gentlemen! I beg of you! Take him away!"

Of course the irate By was caught hold of and drawn back, and urged not to make a fool of himself, by those who, accounted his friends, could do this without offense; of course he yielded slowly, turning his head from side to side as he argued the case with those on the right and left; and equally of course the clerk swaggered:

"No! no! Let him come on; ef he thinks he kin make me swaller any of his lip!"

He held his head very high, wagging it defiantly.

Having disposed of one combatant, Adam Farley returned to the assault on the clerk's memory.

"The rooms! the rooms!" he urged. "Where can we find the men we are after?"

"That's all right," said the clerk. "Treat me like a gentleman, an' you'll git the same in return; but I ain't takin' no jaw from nobody; an' I want that distinctly understood!"

And he seemed to calm himself and gradually give his attention once more to the matter of business.

With a deliberation which Adam Farley thought it wise not to seek to expedite, he took the hotel register from under the counter—for the "office" was only an appendage to the drinking-bar—and began to turn the leaves with a defiant carelessness which plainly told the mob that they would have to wait his motions.

But Adam Farley ran his eye over the last page, and found the names himself.

"Seventeen and thirty-one!" he said. "Follow me, gentlemen!"

And the mob made its way as quietly as possible down the passage that ran the length of the building.

Of course all this had transpired in less time than it takes to tell it; and, more or less bawling being a matter of nightly—indeed hourly—occurrence, the row had not been sufficiently unusual to disturb any of the sleepers.

Tiger Dick had gone to his room, feeling decidedly "broke up." His nerves were all unstrung, and he had little hope of sleep that night, though he felt exhausted enough to sleep twenty-four hours on a stretch.

In such a state his chances of rest would be better if he threw himself on his bunk in his clothes, instead of undressing.

This he did, lying on his face, hugging his pillow; when, contrary to his expectation, he fell asleep almost as soon as he touched the bed. But it was a sleep that was worse than wakefulness; for he was visited by a horrible nightmare.

He dreamed that he heard an indistinct murmur which swelled until it became a wild hubbub of excited voices. Then he seemed to perceive from every quarter all the inhabitants of the world come swarming over mountain and plain toward him, until the earth trembled under their multitudinous tread, and the air became oppressive with their breath. Every eye was fixed upon him menacingly, and every lip anathematized him. Like wolves they rushed upon him, until it seemed as if, before those who reached him first could tear him to pieces, the countless horde coming after would climb upon each other in their mad lust for his blood and bury him beneath a mountain of struggling humanity!

Mastered by a terror with which no extremity of danger could have inspired him in his waking moments, he leaped up, blind and dizzy.

A voice called him to full wakefulness, saying:

"Boss, we've come for you!"

That constant watchfulness which makes the snatching of a weapon automatic had directed his hand to his revolver at the instant of waking, and without any conscious effort of his will, he held the weapon ready cocked.

He looked around above the level of his head.

Over the top of the partition appeared the heads and shoulders of half a dozen men, with cocked revolvers trained on his body. They were standing in the bunks of the adjacent rooms on either side.

"It's no use, boss," said one. "You're in a box that thar ain't but one way out of, an' that's through the door. You might as well cave peaceable."

At that critical moment he caught a glimpse of a face pressed against the window, which he recognized as Shadow Jim's; and he heard him cry:

"Jump!"

The next instant the face disappeared.

Shadow Jim's direction to the Sportive Sport was not audible; but what he said was:

"You take one of 'em to the right!"

The Sportive Sport comprehended his purpose and acted in conjunction with him just closely enough so that two distinct pistol-shots were heard not far enough apart to be shot from one revolver.

Two panes of glass went "ping!" Two cries answered on opposite sides of Tiger Dick's room; and two heads dropped out of sight.

Dick grasped the situation in a flash—what his colleagues were trying to do for him, and what he must do for himself. He carried out his part as if he were moved by the same will.

He fired two shots—one on either side—so close upon the others and so rapidly that his enemies who were not hit were daunted by this vigorous assault from without and from within, and dodged down their heads.

To snatch up a blanket and swing it so that it fell over his head and face, and thus protected to leap through the window, carrying out sash, glass and all, was the work of an instant.

He was followed by a shower of bullets and a storm of furious yells and execrations; and his determined pursuers leaped over the partitions into his room, and followed him through the way he had cleared, while the rest of the maddened mob poured round the corner from the front of the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MASTERLY RETREAT.

DICK alighted all in a heap on the ground, wound up in his bed-clothes. But he had escaped the ugly cuts glass is sure to inflict; and much more quickly than he could have disentangled himself, he was grasped by either shoulder by his friends and lifted to his feet.

"This way!" cried Shadow Jim, grasping his hand and hurrying him along, while the Sportive Sport covered their retreat by firing at their approaching enemies.

This was to give Dick a chance to recover from the shock of his fall. He required but a moment, and then he was himself again.

His first words were:

"Have you got word to Iron Despard? Is he in the house? If he is, we can't leave him."

Shadow Jim replied as he ran:

"He is not in the house. A party went to the widow Reilly's to take him. Of course I came to you first. I was sorry that there was not two of me. I had to leave him to his luck."

"At the widow Reilly's? Do you know where it is? Let us go there at once. We may be in time to get in a shot that will be worth something to him."

Dick never deserted a friend, no matter how great the odds.

Shadow Jim was always prudent. He loved "Shadow Jim" too well to rush into absolutely forlorn hopes. Yet it must be admitted that he was faithful too. He would have taken great risks for Tiger Dick—greater than for any one else.

However it would be too markedly craven to back out now; so he led the way to the widow Reilly's.

Now that there was no longer need for caution, it seemed as if pandemonium had broke loose. The mob yelled its rage, and summoned those who were asleep to its assistance. Shanties were thrown open on every side, and half-dressed men rushed into the street. Whatever else they might lack, however, they were sure to have on their boots and pistol-belts.

The night was so dark, and the movements of our friends had been so prompt, that the mob which stormed the hotel had lost sight of them; but the camp was fast becoming a very hornet's-nest. As if by magic lights streamed from open doorways on every side.

It chanced that one of these floods of light poured over the party which held Iron Despard in captivity.

He had been lifted to his feet and seemed quite helpless—so much so that he leaned heavily on the men who supported him on either side. But this was a pretense to beguile the watchfulness of his captors. Bruised and battered as he was externally, he had sustained no injury which would impair his superb strength, his athletic agility. He waited for some circumstance which would make available his muscles of tempered steel.

So his friends, as they came rushing down the street, saw him in the midst of his enemies.

But to him and to those who surrounded him the fugitives, being in the dark, were indistinguishable, until they were disclosed by the flashes of their weapons.

"Charge!" shouted Tiger Dick; and his revolver was the first to speak.

A demon of destruction seemed to spring up in his breast, and he leaped into the very midst of the surprised vigilantes, blazing away with a pistol in either hand.

The Sportive Sport was not much behind him in execution; but Shadow Jim, whose movements were like the sinuous writhing of a snake, glided in, and with lightning slashes of his bowie, severed the ligatures which bound his friend.

Then he thrust a weapon into his hand.

Even as he received it, Iron Despard throttled Moran with the other hand, tripped him, and threw him to the ground heavily.

The surprise was so complete that Moran had not had time to move a muscle in self-defense, when the crash with which he struck the ground was followed by a stunning blow on the head with the butt of a revolver.

Iron Despard had work to do which required expedition; and he made every movement tell. The prize was in his hands, if he could but get possession of it, and make his escape from the men who, attracted by the uproar of this terrific set-to, were rushing to the spot from every direction.

His hand glided into Joe Moran's bosom, reappeared with the precious package, and was thrust into his own pocket, whence it came forth empty.

He then snatched Moran's bowie, and aimed a deadly blow at his heart, determined to end the contest and punish his treachery with a single stroke; but his wrist was seized and a downward blow aimed at his neck, which he with difficulty evaded; and he found himself struggling in a wrestling bout with a foe worthy of his muscle.

Even if he could master him in the end, the fellow might be able to detain him until the arrival of overpowering aid.

All seemed lost, when Shadow Jim rendered him another inestimable service.

A quick blow on the head so stunned the pertinacious wrestler, that Iron Despard was enabled to cast him off and leap to his feet.

"Maybe next time you won't be so quick to think me a snide, pardner," laughed Jim.

But Iron Despard did not stop to answer him. He was in no humorous mood. On the contrary, he was enraged at having been surprised and made a prisoner by these men whom he despised. In his wrestling match, between staggering and rolling, he had been carried out of the vicinity of Joe Moran, who yet lay unconscious, a stumbling-block in the darkness. Unaware of this, Iron Despard had not the time to hunt him up; but he resolved to take satisfaction for his humiliation out of all within reach.

Tiger Dick, as we know, fought with a spirit of devilish recklessness which possessed him.

The Sportive Sport, being in a contest, always fought to win.

So these three best fighting men in the mines scattered their enemies as the storm-wind drives dry leaves in autumn!

The rout was instantaneous and complete. All told, it had not taken thirty seconds. But the party under Adam Farley, and the miners who rushed from their shanties—the whole camp was attracted to the spot; and the victors were in imminent danger of being surrounded and overpowered by numbers.

It was Shadow Jim's prudence that saved them.

"Come, boys!" he cried. "What are you trying to do?—clean out the whole camp? But what good will that do you? We ain't fighting for glory, as I understand it. Take a fool's advice, and cut stick! Anyway, I'm off!"

They all saw the folly of continuing the thing any longer, their number being complete; but it required the voice of the Sportive Sport in support of Shadow Jim's sensible suggestion to draw the other two from their mad debauch of blood.

"Come, gentlemen! let us get out of this while we can. These men are nothing to us. We have more profitable work before us. Let us consider that first."

Thus urged, the Tiger and Iron Despard desisted; and the three made good their escape from what in a moment longer would have been as hot a hole as any man need wish to be in.

Shadow Jim had already left them. He had noticed that, in the war against his friends, he seemed to have been quite overlooked or forgotten. This suited him "clear down to the ground!" Besides, while waiting for the Sportive Sport to get through the window, he had kept his ears open and had heard the man who had taken his quarter-eagle make an effort to aid him by detaining the mob. He therefore did not fear betrayal from that quarter. If, then, he had not been seen in the rescue of Iron Despard—and he had kept carefully in the dark—who had any quarrel with him, that he might not yet walk the streets of Coyote unmolested!

Jim preferred to avoid any "unpleasantness;" and in standing by his friends as long as they were in trouble, he felt that he had acquitted himself in all that could be demanded of a gentleman. So now, not being a member of their league he "slid."

But Iron Despard was not yet done.

While held in captivity he had learned Joe Moran's plot. He knew that it was useless to protest against it with the men who had, for an entirely different reason, resolved upon his destruction. He had therefore made no attempt to show up Moran's villainy.

"Gentlemen," he now said, "I have reason to fear that an attempt will be made against the life of the man whose rights we have undertaken to vindicate. Of course his partner cannot afford to let him live to denounce him. I will not urge you to incur the risk; but if you are willing to aid me, I will make an attempt to remove him to a place of greater security."

"Risk!" laughed Tiger Dick, recklessly. "Wasn't it risk that we bargained for? Of course we will risk it, if you can call it risk with such coyotes. By the gods! their camp is well named!"

"And you?" asked Iron Despard of the Sportive Sport.

"You may count on me, of course, for what common humanity demands of us," said Edward Haveland, with a quiet dignity.

"It is agreed, then, and we have no time to waste," said Iron Despard. "Follow me, gentlemen!"

He rapidly led the way to the widow Reilly's.

They owed their freedom from interruption in this to one fact. While the mob was rushing hither and thither through the camp in search of them, securing lanterns and torches for the purpose of dissipating the darkness in which they found refuge, the one man whose natural instinct would have led them to the spot where Iron Despard's purpose must have been frustrated, lay yet unconscious.

Thus while the camp was being flooded with light, and men were scanning each other by the lurid blaze, Iron Despard led his comrades to the shanty where lay ill-starred Bob Cady.

"This way!" he said. "Here is a litter."

And while the others lifted the vehicle on which he had dragged Cady thus far, he for the third time demanded admittance at the widow's door.

"Madam," he said, hurriedly, "I find that your patient will not be safe here. Will you accompany him in the capacity of nurse beyond the reach of the man who is bent upon completing his purpose of murder?"

"That I will," cried Mrs. Reilly; "but I am afraid it will be the death of him to move him in the state he's in. Ain't there enough honest men in Coyote to see that he comes by no further harm?"

"Take the straw-tick and all," said Iron Despard to the Sportive Sport, as he himself took hold of the end at Bob Cady's head, to lift him off onto the litter.

"We have only time to stop for your bonnet and shawl," he went on to Mrs. Reilly. "Have you found them?"

"Yes!" answered the widow, who, impressed with the urgency of the case by the expedition with which the men worked, had run and snatched them from the peg on which they hung.

Iron Despard instantly blew out the light.

"Now, gentlemen, you can open the door and pass out without danger of being seen. Madam, give me your hand, if you please."

This with all his repugnance to women! What incentive was strong enough to enable him to overcome it? The same that was leading him to risk so much for a man unknown to him three hours ago!

Then, while his comrades were passing through the door with their burden, and as he took her hand to guide her trembling steps in the darkness, Iron Despard answered the widow's question.

"There are doubtless enough honest men in the camp, if we could get a hearing from them; but circumstances which there is not now time to explain have made that impossible at present. Before we succeed in gaining their ear it might be too late. Now, then, not a sound more until we are safely beyond ear-shot."

In leaving her home thus, the widow Reilly was not going with an entire stranger. She had known Iron Despard before the year of his marriage which had ended so disastrously; and whatever else might be said of him, she had known him to be thoroughly "square" in all his dealings. So now she followed him without question.

Their course was unavoidably a difficult one, since they had to leave the road and make their way over wild ground. But worse was to come. They had hardly gained twenty rods from the shanty when Tiger Dick, who was in advance, stumbled; and as the lurch caused the Sportive Sport to take a long stride over an obstructing stone, the thrust bore the Tiger to his knees, and made him drop his end of the litter.

The shock roused Bob Cady from the deep sleep into which he had been sunk; and as he woke somewhat delirious, and found himself in the dark with unknown voices about him, he was seized with an unreasoning terror, and leaped from the litter, yelling at the top of his lungs:

"Help! help! help! I'm being murdered!"

"In Heaven's name!" cried Iron Despard, in dismay.

Then he had a bright idea.

"Don't touch him, gentlemen!" he cried, hurriedly, yet guardedly.

At the same instant he thrust Mrs. Reilly forward, saying:

"You speak to him. Your woman's voice may reassure him."

He could have bit his tongue off as he forced himself to speak the words which acknowledged his dependence upon one of the hated sex; but the exigency of the case would admit of no denial.

In a quavering voice Mrs. Reilly appealed to the poor fellow who was unwittingly bringing death down upon them all—himself not less than the others.

"Oh, sir! you are perfectly safe," she assured him. "These are all your friends. We are taking you where you will have every care. Do get back on to the litter! You will come by your death on the damp ground with your bare feet! And for mercy's sake don't cry out any more! You are followed by bitter enemies. See! you are bringing them down upon us!"

It was true. Bob's shrieks, so different from the yells that filled the camp and coming from out in the darkness, at once attracted attention.

The men nearest at hand were seen to pause and peer curiously in that direction, holding their torches above their heads. Then some hurried words passed between them, and they set out at a run, the widow's deserted shanty being directly in their line of approach.

Meanwhile, at the sound of Mrs. Reilly's voice Bob stopped his outcry.

"Who are you?" he asked, groping for her in the darkness, and clinging to her with trembling hands. "You are a woman! You—you will not hurt me!"

"No, no; none of us will hurt you. We are taking you out of danger. Only get back on the litter so we can carry you. You are too sick to walk by yourself."

"Is this hell?" cried the poor fellow, with a new accession of terror. "See them devils leapin' about, throwin' the fire an' brimstun right an' left! An' what are these black things? More devils come to take me down there?"

He reached out his hand and touched Iron Despard, who was nearest him, standing so that the outlines of his body were brought out against the background of flaring torchlight, the Sportive Sport being for the same reason dimly visible.

From the contact of his hand with Despard's body, he shrunk back with a shriek into the arms of Mrs. Reilly, moaning piteously:

"Save me—oh, save me!"

By this time Joe Moran had been found and brought to his senses.

The moment he picked up the broken links of recollection, his rage was unbounded.

"Where are the devils? Have you captured them all? Let me get at them, and hew them to inch pieces with my own hand!"

His eyes were bloodshot; he foamed at the mouth; he raged about like a madman. Clutching at his bowie, and finding it gone, he appealed to the man nearest him.

"Give me a knife! Let me get at them! No man shall stand between me and my revenge! I'll not leave one shred of flesh clinging to another!"

"Boss," said a miner whose sense of humor no tragic passion could awe, "first ketch yer fella!"

At this the others laughed—so close akin are farce and tragedy in this wild country.

Joe Moran dashed his tangled hair from his eyes, and glared at them.

"What!" he roared, "have you let them escape?"

"Oh, no! We hadn't nothin' to do with it! They jest dug out, promiscuous like."

Moran choked with fury so that he could not speak.

Then flashed across his mind his possible loss. He thrust his hand into his breast, and knew the worst. The game was up! Not a scrap remained to him of that precious cipher for which he had done worse than murder—betrayed his partner! Iron Despard had got safely away with it; and he, with his backing of the two best men in the mines, made three of a kind beside which he—Moran—and Adam Farley seemed a very small pair indeed.

At this moment were heard the shrieks of poor Bob.

The truth—the whole truth, with all its bearings—flashed upon Moran.

"They are saving Bob to testify against me!" he reflected. "This country will be too hot to hold me, anywhere between the foothills and the Golden Gate, if it is once known that I tried to murder my pardner in order to rob him! But I'll have one more crack at 'em before I give it up!"

And swinging his revolver above his head, he shouted:

"Gents, that's our game! Once more to the scratch! Follow me!"

Adam Farley was at his heels, his chagrin bursting forth not less hotly.

"Away! away!" he shouted. "And this

time leave no one alive to escape! Death to these devils on sight!"

The cry was caught up on every lip.

"Death on sight!"

And madly they rushed forward, swinging their torches until their crimson flames seemed to bathe the passion-distorted faces of their bearers in blood.

The shanty of the widow Reilly was reached, and found dark and deserted. This was proof positive to Moran, and a shadow of doubt remained.

"It's them beyond all question!" he shouted. "Come on!"

"Hark!" cried Adam Farley.

It was Bob's last shriek, when, having reached out and touched Iron Despard in the darkness, convinced in his delirium that he was a devil, he cowered in Mrs. Reilly's arms.

"Did you hear it? It came from this direction! Forward, men! Spread out! We can't miss them. We'll soon run them down, or force them to abandon the only man who can read the cipher for them!"

It was Moran who thus cunningly kept before the minds of the mob the lie he had devised to enlist their co-operation in the accomplishment of his crime.

With yells of fresh fury they sprang after him, like hounds on a hot trail.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GATEWAY OF DEATH.

THE fugitives were now driven to the last extremity. There was not a moment to be lost. To stay there meant capture, followed by ignominious death to them all; to abandon their charge, not to mention the revolt of their manhood from such a desertion, meant the defeat of a project which became more fixed in Iron Despard's mind the greater the obstacles thrown across his path. Yet the man they were struggling to save promised, in his irresponsibility, to force this alternative upon them.

Iron Despard tried what he could do. Speaking in those firm, evenly-modulated tones which never failed to master the natures of weaker men, he said:

"We are all your friends. This is Mrs. Reilly. Don't you know her? She has told you that if you will submit yourself to us, we will save you from your enemies—who are ours as well."

As he spoke these words, rapidly, yet without excitement, he placed his hand on the shoulder of the sick man with a soothing touch.

"Mrs. Reilly?" repeated Bob. "Oh, yes! I know her. She's a good woman. She—"

"Then lie down, deary!" urged the nurse. "Don't lose another minute for the world! See, they are coming!"

"Then let me keep your hand, so that I shall know that you are near."

"Yes! yes!"

And with a dexterity that secured dispatch without violence, Iron Despard placed Bob on the litter, crying:

"Now, gentlemen!"

All this placation was necessary, since violence would only have increased Bob's delirium, until he became utterly unmanageable.

As Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport caught up the litter, Iron Despard opened his dark lantern, so as to throw a light on their path.

"If we can reach the defile that is just on ahead before we are overtaken," he said, "we can defend it against all the men they can bring."

And so, with the mob just at their very heels, they made their way over the uneven ground, Mrs. Reilly with difficulty keeping her feet, as she ran beside the litter, holding Bob's hand, and soothing him with words of assurance.

The view ballooned had drawn all the men in camp on trail. The unusual excitement had pulled every sleeper from his bunk; and with the flaring torches they made an imposing array for three men to hope to cope with.

Mrs. Reilly now proved the heroism of a woman of the border. She never for a moment thought of deserting her post, though the battle was already opened, the mob as it advanced firing random shots into the darkness, in the hope that chance might direct some of them to quick flesh.

"After them, boys! Hyar they are!" was the shout. "No quarter to any one but the woman. Don't shoot her, ef you kin make her out."

And pell-mell they rushed, vying with each other to gain the lead in the chase.

Of course they gained upon the burdened fugitives; and as crags loomed in the path of our friends, the lurid torchlight, illuminating the face of the rocks, brought them out in silhouette.

"There they are. See! see!"

And this announcement was followed by a shower of bullets.

"In there!—quickly!" cried Iron Despard.

And leaping to cover the retreat of his friends, he opened a perfect fusillade upon the mob from both his revolvers.

Yells of pain and rage, the plunging forward of bodies, and the sudden extinguishment of

torches, showed that not all his shots were thrown away.

For a moment his furious assault checked the advance, until his friends had passed through a narrow cleft in the rocks. Then as the swelling crowd before him recovered with the force of numbers, and charged him with yells of execration and a leaden hail far more effective, he leaped through the defile, falling upon his knees, to be caught up by Tiger Dick, and dragged under cover, while the Sportive Sport sprang before the opening, and poured through it a stream of bullets which piled before its entrance three or four men one upon another.

The charge was checked. The mob saw that to try to force a passage through that narrow gateway of death, which would admit but one at a time, would be but to build a barricade of bodies over which those in the rear would have to climb.

So they were left chewing the bitter cud of defeat. They had nothing to show for their share in the fight but a lot of painful wounds and two dead men.

Joe Moran was fairly frantic. Once more had the prize been snatched from his grasp. In his rage at this repeated defeat he would have rushed through the defile upon certain death had he not been restrained by Adam Farley.

"Stay! This is folly!" he exclaimed. "We have one more chance. While they are defending this defile, let us make the north pass, and hem them in, in the rear."

"Now ye're talkin' hoss sense," agreed one of the men. "Thar ain't men enough in this section o' country to force that pass, as long as their ammunition holds out."

Moran yielded.

"Thar's no time fur foolin', then," he said. "We want hosses; or it will be daylight before we turn the mountain."

There were but half a dozen horses in the camp. These were quickly saddled, and bore a party headed by Joe Moran and Adam Farley, to be followed by the general mob on foot, a handful having been left to guard the approach from the Coyote side, so that, if caught, the fugitives could not escape by doubling back over the way they had entered.

Equally determined, Adam Farley and Joe Moran goaded their horses with merciless spur, so that their followers could hardly keep pace with them; but the ground was so broken that no rapid progress could be made. It was not until the gray of the morning that they flanked the mountain, and entered the other end of a gorge that was shaped like a funnel with the defile as its vent.

Here they left their horses, since they would betray their approach, and give time for an ambushade.

"Gents," said one of the men who added prudence to unquestioned courage—indeed, this is the highest kind of courage—"it might stand us in hand to guard this end o' the valley until the crowd comes up. If the men we are after are in thar, they can't git out; besides, we'll have daylight. This prowlin' around in the dark is better fur them as is runnin' than fur them as is tryin' to foller."

But Moran scouted prudent counsels. Farley too had not the patience to wait. Both were too eager for blood to content themselves with folded arms.

"Wait!" cried Joe, scornfully. "How many do you want? Ain't we two to one? I'm used to fightin' without askin' odds! And then, we might be watchin' a last-year's bird's nest. Suppose they didn't stop, but kept right on toward Mulligan's Bend? They were fools if they didn't! In that case, they would have passed here long ago. No, sir! We want to find out if there is anything in our trap; an' if there ain't, then we want to take the crowd an' make a clean sweep o' the country until we run 'em down!"

The general impatience of delay of the borderman was in keeping with this policy, so the cautious one was overruled, and the advance made at once.

Every precaution was observed, so that not even the birds were awakened by their noiseless passage. When they reached the bitter end of the defile, the darkness had been dissipated to that dusk in which objects can be made out with indistinct outlines.

They first discovered the light of the dark-lantern thrown on the rocks. A little back of it was a dark object, which as they crept nearer took the form of a man sitting motionless with his back propped against the rock.

Here was one of them, at least, still on guard. But where were the rest?

"They have gone on. He is alone," whispered Moran in Adam Farley's ear.

Then these two men's hearts began to beat faster. To which had fate vouchsafed the victim of his hate?

"Which is it? Can you make him out?" asked Farley.

"No!" replied Joe sullenly; "not in this light. Hang the darkness! Will it never let up? But whoever it is, he won't have been fool enough to keep by him what I'm after. He'll have sent it on by the others."

Adam Farley cared nothing for the cryptogram. He hungered and thirsted for Tiger

Dick's blood. The wish being father to the hope, he said:

"They can't have left so badly-used-up a man as Iron Despard. The Tiger was their best card for this kind of work."

A dog-in-the-manger jealousy prompted Moran to say:

"It may be the Sportive Sport. He wa'n't no slouch."

"Had we not better advance upon him at once?"

"No. It will be light enough to make him out clean in ten minutes. Then we'll be able to see if the others are anywhere around."

"As long as he don't move and we've got the drop on him, he's perfectly safe."

"You jest bet he's safe *this* time!"

"Now not another sound!"

So they awaited, peeping from the covert at the motionless guard. How strange that he had remained there so long after the others had got ample start to keep ahead of their enemies.

The daylight broadened until his face could be distinctly seen. Then the mystery was explained.

Joe Moran uttered an ejaculation of exultant satisfaction.

"It is Iron Despard!" he whispered.

"But, see!" exclaimed Adam Farley. "The man is stone dead!"

Let the reader pass through that narrow defile which the unerring aim of the Sportive Sport had blocked up with the bodies of his enemies.

With a woman's quick sympathy, Mrs. Reilly sprung to Iron Despard's side, crying:

"Oh! you are hurt!"

"It is nothing!" he said, waving her off.

He struggled to his feet, but feeling faint, was eased back upon a rock by the Tiger.

"Where are you hit?" asked Dick.

"It's in the breast. But don't mind me. Carry him on to a place of safety, and I will stay and guard this pass. They couldn't carry it, if they were ten times their number. You can reach Mulligan's Bend two hours before they can cross the mountain. Put him in care of Six-foot Si; and tell him what he has to look out for."

This was said while the speaker was gasping with pain.

"Hold on," said the Tiger. "This man's all right. What we want to learn first is your own case."

"I shall do very well."

"That's just what we want to find out."

And the Tiger coolly proceeded to open Iron Despard's coat and shirt, to inspect his wound.

He found that a bullet had struck a rib just above the heart, glanced and made a flesh-wound in the arm.

"It was a close call, pardner," he said, "but I reckon you are good for a great many more rounds yet. Sensitive, of course, but—"

He pressed the rib.

Iron Despard winced with pain.

"But solid," concluded the Tiger. "You can tell that it isn't broken."

"Yes! yes! I shall be all right in a few minutes. Don't waste time over me. I will make my way to Mulligan's Bend before daylight."

"You mustn't stay too long. They may try to take you in the rear."

"They won't find me. Good-night!"

Satisfied that he could take care of himself, as well as guard the pass, his friends again lifted their burden, Mrs. Reilly soothing the patient, to whose distempered brain all of this turmoil was imperfectly intelligible.

Alone, Iron Despard set his dark-lantern so that, out of range of the bullets of his enemies, it cast a bar of light across the defile. While this was so placed it was impossible for them to creep upon him in the darkness, even if his sense of hearing failed to warn him.

For a while the indistinguishable sound of voices came from beyond the rocks through the defile. But that gradually subsided; and ere long the unbroken silence of night reigned around.

Iron Despard did not propose to let this lull him into a false sense of security. None knew better than he that it might be preparatory to a sudden charge down the defile. So he kept his ears on the alert and his eyes on the point where the pass was illuminated by his dark lantern.

But in this there was nothing to prevent him from thinking thoughts quite foreign to his vigil; and they came like a flock of ill-omened birds, darkening the air.

He thought of his life, the happiness of which had been wrecked by the falsehood of the woman he had loved—perhaps with an ill-regulated passion; for his was an intense nature in which love was a sort of frenzy. He gave his whole soul, and demanded in return every corner of the soul before which he bowed down.

Was there no truth in woman? He had sworn it almost hourly since the night he had fled from San Francisco, leaving the wreck of his home behind him. And yet those letters from Bob Cady's sweetheart had fallen like a thunderbolt from heaven in his path, proclaiming woman's devotion and constancy.

Every syllable of those heart-cries of a humble yet faithful love, had burned into his soul as if written in letters of fire, carrying conviction against all the furious skepticism born of his bitter experience.

He believed in her; and though he did not acknowledge it to himself, from the time when he constructed a litter on which to carry Bob to Coyote, he had been acting on that faith. He was risking his life to reunite these lovers, and to secure for them that wealth which would clothe all their future life with peace and beauty. Let their love, which had begun in such bitterness, end in the fullest fruition of happiness that this life can give.

And yet against all this generous purpose rose the bitterness of his resentment. Why should he, who had suffered so at the hands of women, concern himself with the sufferings of one of the hateful sex, be she never so faithful?

So raged the battle in his heart, until he ceased to note the flight of time, and forgot his surroundings. His eyes remained fixed upon the illuminated rock; yet saw nothing; his ears still on the alert, no longer remembered for what.

Then came the reaction after his long wakefulness and the bodily and mental strain of the past few hours, following upon the days of anguish and soul-conflict; and as he gradually yielded his will to the generous purpose which had conquered the worse part of his nature, a languor, both physical and spiritual, crept over him, so insidiously that he sunk into deep sleep without warning.

Thus his enemies found him. His pistols rested across his knees in readiness for instant use; but his consciousness was locked in slumber so profound that even the airy sprites of dream-land were shut out.

For comfort, he had propped himself in an angle of the rock, so that when his muscles relaxed in sleep, he still remained erect. Even his head, resting against the rock, had not fallen forward upon his breast.

But his jaw had dropped; and this, with his extreme pallor, resulting from the loss of blood, and noticeable wherever his face was free from blood and dirt, gave him the cadaverous look of a corpse.

"Dead!" repeated Joe Moran after Adam Farley. "And they left him there like a 'quaker soldier' in an abandoned fort! Well, we've wasted a good deal of time on his account."

"Gents," whispered a sharp-sighted fellow in their following, "that man ain't dead."

"Not dead."

"Ef he is, you may use my head fur a football!"

"What do you call it, my Christian friend, when a man stops breathing?"

"That's jest it. He hain't stopped."

"The dense he hasn't! Well, it looks a good deal like it."

"To you, maybe; but not to me. I tell ye, that galoot's breathin' bellus is a-workin' jest as free as yours or mine."

"Then what is he settin' thar for?"

"He's asleep. That's what's the matter with him!"

"Asleep!"

Joe was about to scoff at the idea; but as the daylight broadened he fancied that he could make out the regular rise and fall of Iron Despard's deep chest.

The man at his elbow went on:

"I've seen men asleep in line o' battle, while he was waitin' fur orders to advance on the enemy's position."

Just then a bird trilled a long melodious note, the herald of the new day.

It was answered by a few peeps, which swelled into a chorus of twittering that swept through the valley like a tidal wave of melody.

Iron Despard's breast rose with a long, deep inhalation; and his head moved slightly.

"By thunder! he is snoozin'!" muttered Moran.

"Then creep forward, and take him before he is fairly awake," said Adam Farley.

"I kin give him a through ticket without disturbin' his slumbers, from here!"

And Moran drew his revolver.

But Adam Farley had an eye to appearances. As a man of means, he had a certain position to maintain. He could not afford to have it whispered on the streets of Frisco that he had countenanced the shooting down in cold blood of even the most desperate character; though to have acted as Judge Lynch would give him a certain *reclat* in the society of the Western metropolis.

So he now put a restraining hand on Moran's arm.

"Hold on! We're not murdering men yet awhile, when it's just as easy to hang them in due form."

Joe turned round and stared at him.

"And much good he'll git out o' the difference!" he exclaimed.

"Much or little, he has the benefit of a trial, you understand."

There was a quiet determination about Adam Farley which few men would care to oppose when not angry.

Joe Moran yielded with a sullen frown.

Adam Farley, with a covert assertion of authority, gave the next order to the men.

"Advance upon him as quietly as possible, keeping the drop on him. No firing unless he makes a desperate resistance."

They rose and crept forward.

Another burst of minstrelsy swept through the gulch, followed by the fitful whirring of wings.

With a start Iron Despard sprung into complete wakefulness.

He was confronted by a semi-circle of enemies, each regarding him with a grim smile of triumph over the barrel of a revolver leveled at his heart!

"Hyar we are ag'in!" was Joe Moran's salutation.

CHAPTER XVI.

SIX-FOOT SI.

HAVING left their colleague on guard, Tiger Dick and the Sportive Sport made what progress they could in the darkness toward Mulligan's Bend. It was necessarily slow, since, as far as footing was concerned, they had to take whatever came, without any warning from the sense of sight.

The constant stumbling over unseen obstacles made their task exceedingly toilsome, so that they had to rest frequently. Yet the Sportive Sport urged their progress into a forced march.

"I have a presentiment that we are not out of this thing yet," he said. "If it occurs to them to construct a wooden shield to be borne before them, they can force that defile in half an hour. Then we might as well throw up the sponge! Or with good horses they might make the north pass and intercept us, if we don't pull foot pretty lively."

"Pitch your own trump," said the Tiger. "I reckon I can stand it as long as you can."

"I find that I haven't the muscle nor wind I once had," replied the Sportive Sport. "City life softens one up all round."

But he proved that his powers of endurance were far from contemptible; and it was not yet morning when they found themselves at Mulligan's Bend.

The mining-camp was wrapped in sleep as they passed down its one street to the shanty occupied by Six-foot Si, to which they were directed by Mrs. Reilly.

A rousing summons on the door brought the proprietor of the place out of his bunk with the promptness of a Jack-in-the-box. They could hear his bare feet strike the floor as he demanded sharply:

"Who's hyar?"

"Friends," replied the Sportive Sport. "We come from Coyote by the direction of Colonel Dangerfield."

"Iron Despard? That's enough," was the response.

And the hospitable master of the house threw wide the door.

"Come right in, gents," he said. "This hyar shebang, sich as it is, is entirely at yer sarvice. Excuse me, ma'am!"

For at this moment he made out the lady who was in their company.

"Ef so be you'll wait until I get into my trousers—"

And he modestly drew back from the doorway.

As the deficiency of the toilet was no bar to them, Tiger Dick and Sportive Sport did not wait for its completion, but entered at once with their burden.

"We have brought you a wounded man," said the Sportive Sport.

"Exactly!" interposed Six-foot Si, to show how heartily he welcomed them, "and a nurse to take care of him. The more the merrier, gentlemen! Anything I kin do fur Iron Despard or his friends does me proud."

But he was too polite to keep the lady waiting a moment longer than was unavoidable; and, having got into his trousers, which, according to the western code of etiquette, made him presentable, though his feet were yet bare and his "galluses" slapped his heels, he struck a light, and going to the door, said:

"Now, ma'am, ef you'll kindly excuse me keepin' ye waitin', an'll do me the honor to enter my humble abode, I'll be glad to have ye consider one or two long as ye favor me with yer card and papers of."

And with a bow and a wave of his hand, and perceremonious as if he were at a social point, and perceremonious as if he were at a social point, he effect on men

"You're very civil-spoken, I'm rward in their much obleeged to ye!" said Mrs. Reilly, albeit with what overcome by his gallantry.

"Don't mention it, ma'am! I'm pleased to lay yer commands on me, an' I'm only too happy to git anything y' want."

He closed the door after her, and turned with a really pleased smile to see that his male guests had not stood on ceremony, but were already busy transferring the wounded man from the litter to his bunk.

"We have no time to lose," said the Sportive Sport, with a feeling that some sort of apology

was due for this free and easy appropriation of the hospitalities of the house.

"That's right, gentlemen," interposed his host, before he could proceed further. "When my friends stand round waitin' fur a special invitation between each move, they as good as tell me that I look like a churl that gives a grudging welcome. Ef you make yerselves perfectly at home, I shall know that you take me fur the good feller I try to be."

The Sportive Sport turned to look again at this man who clothed in rude phrase the finest instincts of a gentleman. The candle-light fell over a tall, straight, broad-shouldered and deep-chested fellow, with fair hair, and a blonde beard falling over his breast to his waist. His blue eyes had a twinkle of merriment in them, and his smile was strikingly genial.

Impulsively the Sportive Sport extended his hand, to have it received into a grip that would make most men wince with pain.

"I count it an honor to have met you, sir!" he said, impulsively.

Six-foot Si laughed with almost childlike pleasure, as he gave the hand he held an added squeeze and a shake one of which was enough for all day.

"Waal, now, je t look a' thar!" he exclaimed. "It only takes a pleasant word to make all men brothers!"

And in the exuberance of his good-will he included Tiger Dick in his beaming smile, and gave him his other hand.

"This gentleman," said the Sportive Sport, "is Mr. Richard Langley, whom you may know better under the name of Tiger Dick."

"Tiger Dick? I should say so! I reckon thar hasn't meny in this section o' country as hain't heard o' Tiger Dick. It does me proud, sir, to grip a hand as I know ain't no slouch on the trigger."

Six-foot Si was not the style of man that Tiger Dick most admired. He had not that appreciation of innate courtesy, in however rough a dress, which drew the Sportive Sport toward their host. So he contented himself with a simple bow of acknowledgment.

But as these feelings are apt to be reciprocal, Six-foot Si did not wait for an answer, but turned again to the Sportive Sport.

"And what might I call you, now?" he asked. "I don't mind sayin' that I've taken a likin' to ye."

"Thank you! My name is Elward Haveland."

"I'm glad to know ye, sir. I hope that we may see more of each other, ef so be it's agreeable to you."

"I can heartily return the compliment, Mr.—"

"Waal, now, I reckon ye might as well call me Six-foot Si. Ef I ever had any other handle, I allow it's about outlawed by this time. Now, ef we only had Iron Despard hyar! Why, Lord love ye— But thar! We're furgittin' this hyar pore galoot."

"We can leave him to the care of Mrs. Reilly," said the Sportive Sport.

"You can that, gentlemen. Don't worry about me. I can find everything I want."

"Ma'am, ef I'd 'a' knowed ye was comin' I'd 'a' had things handier."

"What we want immediately," pursued the Sportive Sport—"what we must have, is a body o' men—"

"Consider that you have the whole Bend!" cried Six-foot Si. "Excuse me fur takin' up time a-waggin' of my jaw—the which it's a failin' of yours truly—when spy's the word."

And by way of making up for lost time, the giant began to throw himself into his clothes with surprising rapidity.

While he was doing so, the Sportive Sport told him the circumstances under which Iron Despard had been left.

"I am afraid to wait for him to join us," he said.

"He is determined enough to stand against all odds to the bitter end. And then his strength may fail. There is no estimating how severely he was wounded and otherwise hurt. Add to all this the danger of their outflanking him; and I think that it is only common prudence for us to go prepared to meet a party of men who are determined on and execution."

"We're goin' to git up mighty airy in the mornin'!" Iron Despard!" said Six-foot Si, with assurance. "Maybe they kin't git up without nary winkin'. Waal, I'll be there to try!"

As he was rushing up and down the hill, he was looking at the top of his stentorian

"Yes! oh yes! Come! tumble out lively! lively! The devil's to take ye! Go a powerful burry! Roll out! Wake snakes, wake snakes! Wake yer money down!"

In this kind of style it did not take long to "route out" the whole Bend. Sleep was of no consequence when there was any "fun" in prospect.

Everybody made his appearance "full beeled," of course. Whatever the occasion, shooting-irons were never in the way.

Six foot Si was surrounded by an excited

throng, eager for anything that would serve as an excuse for burning powder.

When they learned that they were asked to champion some cause—they didn't stop to ascertain just what—against the rival city of Coyote, one burly fellow leaped into the air and struck his feet together thrice before alighting, shrieking out in his delight:

"O-o-oh, peel me!"

Everybody volunteered to go and "tear out" the neighboring camp. The general sentiment was expressed by one who cried:

"Oh glory! I wish there was half a dozen of me! I never felt so miserably few in all my life! Why—oh! why wasn't I born twins? That would have been something toward it!"

"Look a-hyar, boys!" cried Six-foot Si. "Stop your cavortin'. Ye can't all go. D'ye think I'd be fool enough to take sich a raft o' galoots to give the whole thing away? We may have to git in some fine work, ye onderstand, before we git back. A round dozen o' good men air worth more than a mob of odds an' ends."

"Who in thunder air ye callin' 'odds an' ends?" demanded one, not ill-naturedly, for Six-foot Si was a general favorite, and said pretty much what he chose.

But the crowd stood aghast. Every man felt as if the one cherished ambition of his life were in danger of slipping through his fingers.

Then of a sudden they fell upon Si like a swarm of bees.

"Of course, I'm yer man. You want me, Si. Jest tell me what to go fur, an' then give me elbow-room!"

"Oh, yes! Tom's all right on a knock-down-an'-drag-out; but what you want is a man that's on the shoot. You know me, Si. Didn't I lay out little Frenchy—an' him jest greased lightnin' on the trigger?"

In this sort of contention—every one sounding his peculiar qualifications—they made a perfect Babel, until Six-foot Si was fain to cry:

"Oh! shut up!"

Then he selected his men. But a last unfortunate one clung to him, pleading with exaggerated aff ctation of exquisite anguish:

"Fur de love o' God, Si, don't leave me hyar! I've been spilin' fur months! I hain't relished my vittles—I sw'ar to ye, I hain't! Ef you only knowed what it is to be a wild-cat shut up in a Sunday-school! Make it a baker's dozen, Si! Remember, thar's luck in odd numbers."

This plea was urged in so plaintive a wail, and the applicant, in spite of his tomfoolery, was so desirable, that Six-foot Si relented, and made it a "baker's dozen."

Then they set out over the back track at a double-quick.

With that genuine courtesy which underlay all of his intercourse with others, Six-foot Si, by implication rather than expressly, put himself and his men under the orders of the Sportive Sport. It was done so pointedly, yet so as a matter of course, that every one accepted it without thought, and looked to him for the direction of the party.

As they progressed without meeting Iron Despard, the anxiety of the Sportive Sport increased.

When they came upon the horses, he was in despair.

"They have got him!" he whispered to Six-foot Si, not knowing as yet that the men were not near their horses.

"Hold on," said Si. "Maybe we ain't down yet! Them hosses is alone. I kin tell by their movements."

"Well?"

"Don't you see how it is? They've tied 'em up, an' gone in thar on the quiet."

"Then let us follow them immediately! We may yet be in time to save him."

"Jest give me twenty seconds!"

And Six-foot Si glided away.

"So, boys!" he said, soothingly, as he slipped among the horses.

The horses recognized a friend and made no disturbance.

He struck a match and cast its light on the ground at their feet. The soil was but little broken by their hoofs.

"Good!" he ejaculated, and slipped back to his friends.

"Well?" was the Sportive Sport's eager question.

"They ain't ten minutes ahead of us!"

"Come on, then!"

"He's safe yet," said Si, as they glided forward.

"Yes, or we should have heard the noise of the capture."

With this encouragement they hurried on.

"H't!" warned Six-foot Si, suddenly.

"There they are!"

The fluttering of the birds just awaking to the joy of the new day, had covered the slight noise made by the party from Mulligan's Bend, so that they had come almost upon the others undiscovered.

As Si whispered his warning, those in advance rose from the covert not five rods away, so that Joe Moran's triumphant announcement of himself was clearly audible.

Its significance could not be doubted, though that Iron Despard could be taken so quietly filled his friends, who could not yet see him, with astonishment.

"Forward, men! No firing unless I order it!" whispered the Sportive Sport.

And silently, yet rapidly, they closed in upon their unsuspecting foes.

Iron Despard did not move a muscle. He saw at a glance the utter madness of resistance. Any fool can "sell his life dearly," as the phrase goes; but it takes a cool head to accept calmly the hopeless present, and wait patiently on the alert for the first rift in the clouds of a brightening future. To such men comes the opportunity to snatch victory from defeat.

"It won't do to try none o' yer snap games," said Moran, suspicious of this passive acceptance. "We've got you dead to rights, now; an' our only complaint is that your friends ain't keepin' ye company."

At the pretty surprise he was going to spring upon the over-confident Joe, the old spirit of banter returned to the Sportive Sport; and catching at Moran's words, he said, with the laugh which had signaled the defeat of many a villainy:

"When wanted, we are *always on hand!* Hal hal ha!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COMMITTEE.

NOTHING that the Sportive Sport could possibly have said would have equaled the effect of the revival of that formula. This was the first time it had been heard on the border for over a year; yet so deep had been its impress on the rascals of that time, that now it was like the crack of a master's whip to a beast that had for a season escaped from its keeper.

Joe Moran started, with a cold thrill running down his back, and half turning, looked over his shoulder.

"You may look round; but, I beg of you, don't turn round!" said the Sportive Sport, in the old tone of banter.

All this was new to Adam Farley; but he was open to the force of the argument of superior numbers.

The Sportive Sport felt a keen sense of exhilaration as he resumed his old way of handling rascals.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I don't trouble you to put up your weapons, nor to hold your hands at that uncomfortable altitude above your heads so often insisted upon. On the contrary, if you think that you can use them to advantage, you are perfectly at liberty to try."

"Ah! Good-morning, Colonel Dangerfield! Is that you over there?"

He broke off as abruptly as if he had just discovered his friend.

Without showing any surprise or relief, Iron Despard thrust his revolvers into their holsters, coolly rose, took up his dark-lantern, and joined his friends, walking unconcernedly through the ranks of his frowning enemies.

"Good-morning, gentlemen!" he said, shaking hands with the leaders of those who had come to his rescue, and bowing to the rank and file.

"Waal, old boy, I'm right glad to see ye!" cried Six-foot Si, striking his hand into that of his friend with a report like that of a pistol.

Then, looking hard at Iron Despard, he kept on:

"Ef thar ain't no particular reason fur further delay, I reckon we might as well be joggin' along back. I feel as ef it was about time fur breakfast."

Iron Despard knew that a better reason than breakfast lay back of Six-foot Si's words. He understood them as an express wish that they return without further business with the men of Coyote.

"There is none, as far as I am concerned," he said, bowing to the Sportive Sport.

Elward Haveland could admit an idea into his head without the use of a beetle and wedge, so he said at once:

"Gentlemen, we only came to extend the hospitalities of Mulligan's Bend to you. If you ever come within a mile of that place, stay there all night!"

"Yaas, within a mile of it!" said the man who had made the "baker's dozen" of the Sportive Sport's party.

With this sarcasm he repaid himself for the mild issue of their incursion into the enemy's country.

His companions looked their dissatisfaction, but said nothing.

So the invading army retreated in good order.

The thirteenth man still further consoled himself by singing:

"The brave old Duke of York, he had a hundred men,

He marched 'em up a hill, an' he marched 'em down again."

"We might have captured that fellow Moran," said the Sportive Sport, looking to Six-foot Si for an explanation of his desire to withdraw as they were.

"If there are more men following them on foot," replied Si, "we couldn't have got through them with one of their set as a prisoner without a fight. The pleasure of hanging him ain't worth the risk—not at this stage of the game."

"I am very well satisfied," said Iron Despard. "The map is the thing of importance; and we have it entire."

They had just reached the further end of the gulch where the horses were picketed, when they met the party on foot from Coyote.

"What did I tell you?" said Six-foot Si. "They outnumber us enough to clean us out in a set-to; but we are too many to attack without very good reason."

The men of Coyote halted, with their hands on their weapons. They saw the three champions, but no trace of the litter, of the wounded man, nor of the nurse.

If the latter had been taken to Mulligan's Bend, there seemed no good reason why the little army should have returned. It was more probable, then, that a messenger had been sent for aid, while the other two remained to guard the defile; in which case Bob Cady would still be in the gulch, and it would appear that some compromise had been effected by which the three champions went free with their allies from Mulligan's Bend, while Coyote detained their victim.

Thus reasoned the foot party from Coyote; and of course they felt bound by the arrangement of their leaders.

Six-foot Si did not halt his men, but marched by the hostiles, bidding them, as if no antagonism existed, a pleasant:

"Good-morning, gentlemen!"

They returned his salute with sulkily suspicion, but did not oppose his progress, which was all he asked of them.

Si chuckled when he was clear of them:

"Gents, ef them galoots knowed that they was goin' to find an empty bird's-nest back thar, you jest bet we wouldn't have got off so easy! When they find that we have cleaned 'em out all round, they may b'ile over, an' come back at us like a thousand o' brick; so I move that in the interests o' peace we slide ahead. You needn't be afraid to run jest now, gents; fur before this thing is over I'll give ye chance enough to show your metal."

They knew that Six-Foot Si was no coward and never "crawfished," when principle called upon him to stand. But his was the courage which is governed by reason and humanity, and not a foolhardy defiance of danger, which needlessly sacrifices life at the behest of vanity. So they counted it no disgrace to break into that swinging trot with which the Indian accomplishes so extraordinary forced marches.

The return to Mulligan's bend was uneventful.

So far the advantage was all with the three champions. Although he hovered between life and death, Bob Cady was henceforth secure from the machinations of his false partner; while Iron Despard, matching the scraps of the cryptogram like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle, found map, key and translation perfect.

"An' now, gents," said Six-foot Si, "this hyar ain't all. The fu'st thing necessary was to git our friend hyar out o' the enemy's lines, so's they wouldn't chaw him up fu'st, an' then find out their mistake afterward. What did we do? We marched over thar, an' fetched him away!"

"You jest bet we did!" yelled one who, without drawing fine lines as to right or wrong, was content with the fact that Mulligan's Bend "had got away with" Coyote.

"But that thar ain't no place to stop. Thar's a right an' a wrong to this hyar thing; an' ef the wrong is whar we believe it is, thar ain't no reason why that galoot, Moran, should continue to be backed by our friends of Coyote."

"Hang their backin'! What's that to us? Ef they want our man, let 'em come hyar an' take him! Eh, boys?"

This sentiment was received with such a yell of approval that Si was forced to cast the weight of his personal influence against it.

"Look a-hyar, gents," he said, "it's all right fur one camp to crow over another in a general way; but when it comes to the puttin' down o' crime, I reckon we all have the same interest ag'in the criminals; an' you jest bet yer humble sarvant ain't the man to interfere to screen no man from his just deserts, no matter whar he belongs! But Iron Despard ain't in that fix; the which Joe Moran is; an' he's the galoot we want to hang. Thar's as good men in Coyote as anywhar else; an' ef they only knowed how things really is, don't you go fur to believe that they would be at all backward about comin' forward an' hangin' him so high that Gabriel's horn wouldn't reach him! Now jest let us unite in makin' this cuss climb a tree; an' then ef you've got any quarrel with Coyote as Coyote, why, you kin take a day off to fight it out whenever ye git ready."

The men responded to this appeal heartily.

Then, at the request of Six-foot Si, Iron Despard told what he knew of Joe Moran's treacherous assault on his partner.

At this case of perfidy the greatest indignation was expressed, by groans and profane denunciations. In the mines there is but one

crime equal to horse-theft—the betrayal of a "pardner."

In a wild country, where men have no fixed abode, the absence of family ties makes the artificial one of partnership almost indispensable to the preservation of life. Not to consider the more than proportionate advantage that two men have over one in guarding against an attack by men like themselves, a passing illness, or a comparatively trifling accident, might leave an isolated man helpless. So, while men who have no claim upon each other are put on an equal footing, and so long as they observe the ordinary rules of fair-play are amenable to no higher law, partners are held to a close account of their fidelity.

Joe Moran, then, stood forth in the character of that monster, a false "pard."

"Now, gents," said Six-foot Si, "I move that we form a committee, an' go over thar peaceable, an' give 'em the true inwardness o' the thing."

Nothing tickles the American fancy like a committee; so Mulligan's Bend, to a man, voted Six-foot Si a "man of ideas," and swore that his last project was the next best thing to an armed invasion of the rival camp.

A committee of twelve was appointed, with Six-foot Si at its head, invested with powers discretionary and plenipotentiary to negotiate a treaty of peace and amity between the cities of Coyote and Mulligan's Bend.

"They'll take it more quieter," said Si, "ef we leave behind the gents that has riled 'em. Then we'll git 'em to appoint a committee to come hyar an' hear our side o' the story. 'Put your man ag'in our man,' says we, 'an' the one that fails to show up the true color goes up a tree! That's what we says to 'em, an' that's fair—the which they can't deny. An'—yeh year me!—Joe Moran ain't a comin' hyar to tackle Iron Despard."

A victory is a victory, whether won by diplomacy or by force of arms; so at the prospect of "backin' Coyote down" the Benders tossed their hats in the air and yelled themselves hoarse with enthusiasm. And thus sped on their mission, the committee marched out of the camp, and bled on their way.

Meanwhile the foot force from Coyote had hastened down the gulch, taking the horses with them, to learn the condition of the compromise.

The passive yielding up of Iron Despard had not surprised the four men who were of the party of horse; but when one of them proposed that they follow his rescuers, in the hope of meeting their reinforcement on foot, Adam Farley's disinclination to follow up a matter which he had inaugurated so hotly struck them as a little strange.

"Gentlemen," was all he vouchsafed, "I reckon this thing is off for the present."

And he coldly turned away, and walked through the defile, leaving them to follow at their leisure.

Joe Moran flushed and then paled with anger. "It seems that Mr. Farley confines his hostility to Tiger Dick, who happens to have won his money, and is only ready to git squar' with him when he can git him at hopeless odds. If that is so, I reckon we kin spare him without any great loss. But I am fightin' fur my pardner, an' I prepo e to foller his murderer ag'in the world. Now, how many in this crowd is ready to stand by me?"

Not one responded to this appeal. The men frowned sullenly. Joe Moran was not of their camp. He had no claim upon them. What little they knew of him was not of a sort calculated to move them to enthusiastic partisanship. On the other hand, though he took little pains to conciliate men—perhaps because he took so little—Adam Farley was quite popular; and when he "soured on the thing," his followers began to view it askance without any further reason for doing so.

"All right, gentlemen!" said Joe, with suppressed fury. "If you kin afford to have it said that you let murderers walk out o' your camp without nary attempt to hold 'em, I allow I kin find backers somewhere else, or go it alone."

He followed Adam Farley through the defile; and the men followed him, not very well satisfied with the position in which they found themselves.

Joe Moran might have gone alone after the army from Mulligan's Bend and tried to enlist the party on foot to aid him in an attack on his enemies; but he reflected that they would ask him why he had been deserted by his own party; and having sampled the temper of the men of Coyote, he resolved to waste no further time on them, but to proceed at once to a new method which he had conceived.

Acknowledging like Moran defeat in the first round, Adam Farley was also unwilling as yet to throw up the sponge.

Going to his office, he wrote to Detective Farnsworth, informing him that he would find in the vicinity of Coyote, the man who had so far succeeded in eluding the hound-like pertinacity of his pursuit.

The citizens of Coyote, finding that discussion of the matter led to nothing, finally dispersed

to their respective claims, and entered upon the day's work. None of them relished the "humble pie" Mulligan's Bend had served out to them; but in the absence of leaders they were forced to content themselves with "mutterings not loud, but deep" of the revenge they would exact if they ever got the rival camp "whar the hair was short."

But the sun had not reached the zenith when a squad of men marching in double file were discovered coming down the road from the direction of Mulligan's Bend.

They had neither banners streaming nor drums beating; but each man had his hat cocked bravely on the side of his head; and as they marched down the street, keeping step with a tread which was meant to indicate that "when they put their foot down it was thar," they looked to the right and left with the bold, defiant glance with which hostile parties have eyed each other ever since men were first arrayed in arms.

At sight of them, all about in the surrounding hills men at windlasses called down shafts, and then elevated other men from the bowels of the earth, all of whom took their way to the open space in front of Billy Bowlegs's saloon.

They looked suspicious as well as curious as they gathered about the little band. What was the meaning of this aggressive movement on the part of these abettors of crime?

CHAPTER XVIII.

HIDE AND SEEK.

THE committee from Mulligan's Bend stood in dignified silence, exchanging words with no one, though they were all more or less acquainted, until a considerable crowd had collected. Then Six-foot Si addressed them with a formality befitting the ambassador of a foreign power.

"Gents, we have the honor to be a committee representin' the city of Mulligan's Bend, an' we want to see the highcockalorum o' this hyar burg."

"You kin do that powerful quick," said one, who constituted himself spokesman for the Coyote crowd.

And calling out to a man who was coming down the street, he cried:

"Hey! Sam, run an' tell Ad Farley that he's wantin' down hyar by a party from Mulligan's Bend."

Farley had seen the committee, and knowing that he would be in demand, thought it would add to his consequence to wait until he was called upon.

Being duly summoned, he made his appearance with the deliberation of one who can afford to keep others waiting his movements.

After a somewhat stiff interchange of salutations, Six-foot Si announced his mission:

"Mr. Adam Farley, sir! an' gentlemen of Coyote!—it is the duty of this by'r committee to inform you that you have been gulled by as cr'nery a cuss as ever showed up in these hyar mountains. Ef so be you'll appoint a committee to set with this hyar one what has the honor to address ye, we'll take 'em over to the Bend in the best style we know how, prove to 'em that this skunk Moran tried to kill an' rob his pard, the which our man, Iron Despard, tried to save his life an' property; an' when it's all over, an' the two camps jines hands over the bloody chasm, as it were, we'll send 'em back home ag'in with their skins full o' the best we've got! Send on yer man an' pit him ag'in our man, an' the one what has to crawfish goes up a tree! It's in the hope that the good feelin's that has ever existed between the two camps will continue that Mulligan's Bend sends her greetin' to Coyote—the which it would be a doggone poor piece o' business fur to fall out over sich a skunk as this same Joe Moran."

The last part of this address was gammon in the fullest sense of the term, and threw dust in the eyes of nobody. Every man present knew that the two camps had been at daggers' points of jealousy ever since Mulligan's Bend had been located one month after Coyote. But then we must leave our politicians and diplomats a slight margin beyond the literal truth for the sake of oratorical effect.

Six-foot Si's communication, bad as it was, had virtues not common to address in that state. It was brief and to the point, and perfectly intelligible.

Its evident sincerity had its effect. Men who were simple and straightforward in habits of thought and feeling, strong and unreasonable prejudices were roused.

"Thar couldn't be nothin' fairer than this," declared one, who nodded to his companion, and received their nods of assent.

Adam Farley saw the trend of public sentiment; and careful of his reputation, he made haste to seem to be in accord with it.

"I cannot answer for Mr. Moran," he said; "but as far as I am concerned, I see no objection to a joint investigation of the matter; and if it is proved that we have been misled, none will be better satisfied with the result than I. At

the same time it is only fair to our own city to say that all the facts would have been brought out in the trial of which we intended to give the accused the full benefit. It is my opinion as a citizen of Coyote that the interference of Mulligan's Bend in this matter was entirely unjustifiable."

At this ungracious fling the brows of the men of Coyote clouded again. The demagogue is always sure of a prompt response when he appeals to the clannish prejudices of men.

"That's all right, gents," said Six-foot Si, placidly. "But when it comes to a fair trial before Judge Lynch—o' course, you know how it is yourselves!"

And he winked and smiled significantly.

"It don't hurt a man's chances fur fair play none, to be backed by his friends. You don't need fur me to tell ye that!"

They did "know how it was themselves," and [the appeal to the sense of humor which never fails with a border crowd counteracted Adam Farley's words.

Six-foot Si was not slow to press the advantage he had gained.

"Thar's one man I've been lookin' fur in this hyar crowd," he said, "the which, to be down-right honest with ye, I didn't much expect to find. That thar's the scallawag as calls himself Joe Moran."

"That's so! Whar is he?"

The question went round, but no one could answer it.

The moment it was ascertained that he was really missing, the demand for him became urgent. Then quick suspicion sprang up in the minds of the men. To be accused, was to be half-convicted of crime.

"Waal, now," said Six-foot Si, rolling his quid to the other side of his mouth with a twinkle of amusement in his eye, "durn my hide ef it don't look as if the skeezicks had seen us come into camp!"

That was enough. His hearers instantly filled out his meaning, and accepted it as the true explanation of Moran's absence.

They began to ransack the camp; and had he been found, even under the least suspicious circumstances—so quickly did suspicion pass over into conviction of his guilt—he would have stood a fair chance of being hanged out of hand.

In five minutes time there was not a man in the camp who doubted the significance of his "flight," as they already called it.

At this moment a great shout was set up. The crowd ran from every direction, to learn that one of the horses was gone also.

Then went up a torrent of execration, while the remaining animals were mounted in hot haste, and the pursuit entered upon at once.

It was not known in which direction the fugitive had gone; so two went one way and three the other.

At last the former party caught sight of him clearing the brow of a mountain, his figure and that of his horse outlined against the sky. Then the chase began in downright earnest.

Hour after hour they hung upon his trail, until the sun had nearly completed its sweep across the heavens. At first he appeared to be distancing them; but later they began to overhaul him. Then it was discovered that his horse was limping. The truth was that the animal had received a strain by having a stone roll from under its foot.

Bitterly did Joe Moran execrate his hard luck. His hatred flamed up against the animal which had borne him to the best of its ability; and he lashed it with unfeeling cruelty.

Behind him thundered his relentless pursuers. Now that they began to scent victory, they would jeer him every time they caught sight of him, as the road rose and fell.

He sent back savage oaths of hatred.

At last his horse stumbled, then staggered, then fell.

He managed to disentangle his feet from the stirrups; but he was thrown with some force on the rocky road.

His pursuers, half a mile in the rear, sent up a yell of derision.

He rose, half-blinded with blood and dirt, and sprang to the horse's head with a drawn revolver.

The animal lay gasping, completely exhausted, and making no effort to rise, or even to lift its head.

Foaming with rage, he was about to send a bullet into its brain, when its piteous gaze and a low whinny unnerved him.

"No! no! bad luck—worse than this—wouldn't be far behind, if I do that!"

And with a superstitious shudder he shrunk back.

There was but one resource left him. He leaped away, and began to climb the rocks.

With yells of triumph his pursuers swept down the road, and as they came within pistol-range opened fire upon him.

"Surrender! surrender!" shouted one of them.

"Take this back with you!" he replied.

And he returned their leaden compliments with interest.

His elevation, and the rocks and bushes that

surrounded him, protected him in a measure from their shots; while they, on horseback in the open road, were completely exposed.

This advantage was quickly manifest. With a savage ejaculation, blended with a howl of pain, one of them reined in his horse, and leaped, half falling, to the ground on the further side, so as to make a breastwork of its body; while the other, realizing his danger, spurred his horse forward until he had passed a crag that screened him.

The man behind the horse opened fire on the fugitive.

"I'll soon unmask your battery!" muttered Moran, as a leaf, cut from just above his head, fluttered down and struck his face.

He aimed deliberately at the horse. As the bullet plowed his flesh, the animal bounded forward with a shrill scream of pain and fright.

The man was thus exposed. Moran fired a second shot. With a smothered oath his victim staggered a step or two, and fell beside the road in some bushes.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the fugitive. "Maybe you won't get back to tell the tale!"

The liberated horse coursed down the road, to be caught by the other pursuer, who had dismounted. He was plucky, and without a moment's hesitation started up after Joe.

"It's that confounded Six-foot Si! Waal, I'd jest as leave lay him out as any one I know!" growled Moran.

But he began to climb again, as if he did not feel quite easy with his present pursuer at his heels.

Reaching a more protected spot, he made another stand; but peer downward as he might, he could get no trace of Six-foot Si.

Had he abandoned the chase, or was he creeping upon him unseen? The uncertainty made Moran nervous. He began to make his way higher.

Suddenly a pistol-shot in his rear settled all doubt. Moran felt as if some one had struck him on the back. He needed no interpreter of that sensation.

With a snarl which resembled that of a wounded animal, he fell forward. For a moment the agitation of the bushes in his immediate vicinity showed that he was writhing on the ground. Then they stopped. Presently they swayed again, as if he made an ineffectual effort to rise. Then they returned to a quiescent state, and all was still—deathly still!

The man who had shot him did not spring up and rush forward with an exultant cry. Indeed, there was no trace of him. The mountain-side seemed deserted.

It was lucky for Si that he knew a thing or two about bush warfare; for at that moment, instead of lying on his face with half-closed and blue-glazed eyes, Joe Moran was on his knees, with a cocked revolver in his hand, peering from his covert for the slightest trace of his enemy.

He got none. If Si was stirring anywhere about, not the snapping of a twig, not the fluttering of a leaf, betrayed the fact.

"Curse him! he's a match for me!" was the tribute Moran paid to his shrewdness. "But if I can hang on till dark, that's all I ask."

He dared not remain long where he was. He suspected that Si was working round to gain a position above him, from which he could see whether he was indeed dead, or only "playing possum."

He listened. The rolling down the slope of a pebble, or the sifting sound of sliding sand, would have conveyed all the intelligence he wanted. But his strained ear was not rewarded with the slightest noise.

Then he began to creep away with a care which showed that he was the peer of the man he was trying to evade, in this sort of maneuvering.

And now a bright idea struck him.

While Si was figuring to get a position further up the mountain, and looking for him to pursue his course in the same direction if his actions after the shot were but a "blind," Joe resolved to go down.

There was risk in such a course; but there was also hope. The horses were out of sight in the road below; but he could hear their movements—now a stamp; now the rattle of a bridle, which told of the impatient tossing of an equine head; now a snort, such as a weary horse delivers with his nose close to the ground.

If he could gain the road undiscovered, choose the animal in best condition and shoot the other, he might laugh at Six-foot Si as he coursed away, leaving him to trudge back to camp on foot.

The mere notion of such a triumph had an attraction for him. Apart from securing his safety, it would be such a good joke; and it would show the men of Coyote that they had "no slouch" to deal with.

To no one is glory of more account than to a borderman.

Inch by inch he worked his way down the mountain-side, cautious where he put his foot, so that twig, nor stone, nor sand, should betray him. All the while he kept most vigilant guard, with eye and ear.

CHAPTER XIX.

"WE WON' GO HOME 'LL MORN'N'!"

At last, after infinite pains, Joe Moran set his foot once more in the mountain road, as yet undiscovered.

The horses were before him. They meant life. The silent mountain was behind him. Somewhere on its side lurked death! It might be far above him; it *might* be at his elbow!

He glided toward the horses. Terrified by his aspect, they snorted and tossed their heads, and tried to break away.

There was no time to lose—that time more precious than diamonds! He sprang forward, marking the wounded horse as he advanced, and dooming it to death. A plunge of his knife into its neck finished all. The pink blood spurted from the severed carotid. The animal leaped aside, then fell upon its knees, then rolled over on its side; then with its head and neck stretched in a line it lay rapidly bleeding to death.

But Joe Moran did not stop to note all this. With a bound he was in the other saddle. Then the clang of flying hoofs rung out sharp and clear.

Far up the side of the slope a man rose among the rocks and underbrush, and muttered an oath of intense disgust, as he impotently watched the rapidly-receding horseman.

Joe Moran turned in his saddle, saw the solitary figure on the mountain, and swinging his hat above his head, sent back a derisive cheer.

Six-foot Si waved his hand to him, with a good-natured admiration for the man who had proved himself able to outwit him.

He then went down the mountain-side to look after his companion.

"Hello!" he said, seeing that the other was lying on his back, but with his eyes open and turned toward him wistfully. "How air ye feelin', old man?"

"Purty bad, Si," was the reply. "I reckon I've got my dose."

"Psho, now!" protested Si. "You ain't ready fur a high lot yet, not by a long shot, ef you'll only think so. Let's see whar you're hit."

An examination proved that no necessarily mortal wound had been received, though the man was weak from loss of blood.

"Nonsense!" cried Si. "We kin patch you up as good as new in jest no time at all. Kin you set up? O' course you kin! Now let's see ef you can't git on your legs. Thar ye be! What do ye want better than that? Why, man, you're steadier on yer pins than I am, now!"

This was not literally true; but it served very well by way of encouragement.

Hank smiled faintly, as he leaned on his companion, who stood like a granite colossus.

"I ain't in trainin' fur no walkin' match," he said. "How in Cain am I to git back to Coyote?"

"Why, ride back!"

"On a dead horse!"

"Not much! How's this byar one? I allow he hain't got much speed left in him; but belike he'll make out to carry you as fast as you want, to travel the way you're feelin' jest now."

At this moment they came in sight of the horse Joe Moran had ridden until it fell. The animal was much exhausted but had regained its feet.

Six-foot Si lifted Hank as he would a child, and placed him on the horse's back. Then turning its head toward Coyote, he walked beside it.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the committee were being very hospitably entertained by the men who had looked upon their entrance into their camp with anything but kindly eyes. But public sentiment had changed with the conviction that they had been "barking up the wrong tree." They were now ready to swear all round that the representatives from Mulligan's Bend were the "whitest" men it had ever been their good fortune to meet.

The return of the party of three some time before nightfall, and the continued absence of the two whom the reader has attended, led to the sending of three fresh men after Six-foot Si and Hank. They took with them provisions—especially a goodly supply of ragged-edged rye!—in case they should be detained over night.

Then, as the darkness fell, the artificial lights of the camp flared out, and the orgies began.

Under the escort of their entertainers, the delegation from Mulligan's Bend "stormed" all of the dance-houses in turn, and the painted and bedizened "angels" smiled upon them with especial favor. The violins squeaked, the flageolets shrieked, the cornets blared, in a way that suggested that the final torment might consist in endowing every one with an ear for music, and then compelling him to listen to this sort of orchestration forever. But the miner who had cheerfully paid his "two bits" for a place on the floor, and then set his slouch hat on the back of his head and "howed it down" in a jig that made up in vigor what it might lack in grace, as he balanced opposite a mincing jezebel with painted lips and penciled eye-lids and powdered bust—judging from his broad grin of enjoyment, he evidently

thought that he was getting a great deal for his money.

On account of the excitement which kept "all hands" from their work, the nightly revel began earlier than usual—indeed, as soon as the sun went down. But it had hardly got under way when the camp was invaded by a body of men numerous enough to prove formidable, if their coming was not amicable.

Mulligan's Bend had got anxious at the long delay of its representatives, and had come over *en masse* to learn its cause.

They were received with every demonstration of hearty good will.

The three champions were of the party; but they suddenly found themselves become heroes. Iron Despard was lionized most of all; the Sportive Sport was received as a man who had made his mark in the world; the "leetle on-pleasantness" between Tiger Dick and the Golden Serpent was tacitly dropped out of view, and all three received the homage which the world is ever ready to pay to its "bossfighting men"—monarchs of the tented plain or of the unstable sea, champions of the ring or of the arena, masters of fence or of the nimble trigger.

Never had Coyote seen such a gala night as this; never had the jealousies of the two camps been so reconciled. Adam Farley fell in with the prevailing sentiment, since he was expected to do the honors of the camp. He played the host to Tiger Dick with the formal courtesy of a medieval baron entertaining his deadliest foe; but Dick had the tact to keep away from the Golden Serpent.

It was near midnight when the horseman returned, bearing the wounded Hank, who was by that time very much exhausted.

The whole camp gathered about to listen to the narrative of that game of hide and seek in which death was the forfeit for being caught. Their execrations of Joe Moran went up on every hand; and the heroes of the hour were lionized anew.

"Gents!" shouted an enthusiastic denizen of Coyote, "ef ary one of our illustrious guests goes home sober, it will be a standin' disgrace to Coyote as long as wood grows an' water runs; an' ef thar's a galoot in Coyote as don't go to bed with his boots on, I say that he's no gentleman!"

"Hear! hear! hear!" went up the shout on all sides.

Then the round of mad debauchery was resumed with new fury, and held unabated until broad daylight.

The morning sun found scores of men lying in all sorts of places, in doors and out, dead drunk, while along the road to Mulligan's Bend reeled a struggling line of inebriates, howling:

"We won' go home'll mornin'! We won' go home'll morn'—hic!—n'!"

On the field of battle—in the saloons Coyote—and along the line of their retreat, this demoralized army left their "dead and wounded."

They were marshaled by Doc Warren, who, with perhaps more liquor in him than any other man in the party, was on his way to his patient apparently none the worse for his thorough pickling in "corn juice." The only sign of intoxication that he exhibited was that he kept shaking hands with everybody within reach and assuring them that this was a red-letter day in the history of Coyote, and that it was the first time that he had ever thoroughly enjoyed himself.

Of the others, the three champions alone were entirely themselves—Tiger Dick because he seemed invulnerable to liquor, and Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport because they had observed moderation, where such prudence was a very difficult matter without offending the men who were determined to get them drunk.

When the reconciliation was assured, Shadow Jim had made his appearance, no one knew whence, and acquitted himself with his peculiar grace; but before he got quite "blind" he had taken himself to his hotel, and carefully doffed his garments, so that they should not get soiled during his unconscious state. When he recovered, he reappeared as spotless as before the revel.

But alas for Jim! The powers that shape our human destiny were preparing a most ignominious eclipse for him.

The lash of Sam Seaver's whip shot out like a lariat and stung the off leader's flank with a ringing crack, at which the four horses set off at a dead run, making the ramshackle old coach sway and creak, and rumble and bump, until it seemed as if it must fall to pieces. But the cloud of dust that rolled up behind it like smoke before the cannon's mouth, made its entry into Egg Harbor what Sam considered a very imposing spectacle.

As it approached the Egg Harbor Hotel, who should be sitting before the door of that hospitable establishment but the elegant Jack Drew? His symmetrical person was disposed on two blocks, one used as a seat and the other as a rest for his high-heeled calf boot. His right elbow rested on the elevated knee, and with that hand he picked his teeth with a pine splint, held daintily between thumb and forefinger, the others being gracefully spread and curved, so that his great cluster diamond ring shined to the best

advantage. His left hand rested palm-down on that thigh, so as to throw his elbow out from his body, completing a very effective attitude.

His light slouch hat was canted over his left eye, leaving the whole right side of his shapely head, with its glossy black locks, exposed to view. His teeth were large and even and white, in contrast with his mustache and goatee, so intensely black that there could be no doubt that they were dyed.

He wore neither coat nor vest; but, far from negligent undress, it was in this that his peculiar style consisted. He prided himself on his speckless linen; and, his pantaloons being supported by the belt which carried his ivory-handled bowie and gold-mounted revolvers, his shirt was pulled up all round so as to bag at the waist. It had a plaited bosom, and opened down the front, being buttoned with diamond studs. A crimson silk neckerchief, passing under a turn-down collar with long points, was tied in a careless scarf-knot, and had its ends tucked through the opening above the first stud. Cuffs secured by gold link sleeve-buttons completed this dazzling array of immaculate white.

There were one or two personal habits of Mr. Jack Drew's to which the society in which he moved could not easily accommodate itself. They could understand why a man should pick his teeth. That was an elegant way of whiling the time, interchangeable with whittling or jabbing with the point of one's knife the hitching-bar on which one balanced. But a tooth-brush! That seemed effeminate and "gassy."

Another thing! Mr. Drew was so dainty in his eating that, finding the two-tined steel fork in common use not to his satisfaction, he always carried a four-tined silver one about with him, as also a silver spoon and one of those silver-plated knives the handle of which is metal like the blade, and which the miners had never seen except in a "tony" restaurant in Frisco or "the States." To see him eat, using this knife only for the purpose of cutting, and never to shovel food into his mouth, impressed the miners with something of the awe inspired by a religious ceremony.

As he drew up before this person, Sam Seaver winked to him, and then threw his head back and opened his mouth to its widest extent—a pantomime guffaw—at the same time jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the inside of the coach.

No change in Mr. Drew's facial muscles indicated that any intelligence had passed between the driver and him; but his eye sought the door of the coach, and caught a glimpse of variegated color.

Instantly he was on his feet, and advancing to the side of the stage with the grace of a dancing-master; and while Sam was winding the lines about the brake-handle, he opened the door, with his hat in his hand.

"Allow me, madam!" he said, with a smile and a bow that would have done credit to a courtier.

CHAPTER XX.

A DINNER UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

THE first return for this courtesy was the furious snapping and snarling of an exceedingly diminutive Skye terrier, whose eyes flashed through the overhanging hair like coals of fire. Then a voice, which Mr. Jack Drew thought charming, said with dainty reproof:

"Fido! Fido!"

And then:

"Oh, sir, you are very kind, I am sure!"

The coach swayed for a moment, as with some one moving within. Then a daintily-kidded hand grasped the jamb of the door. Then a lace-covered parasol made its appearance midway of the door, to be followed at the top by a hat covered with plumes, and at the bottom by the smallest of feet, incased in a French boot, with a heel almost directly under the middle and so high as to compel walking on tiptoe.

Then by degrees issued the body of a lady, who held an ample train over her arm and had her skirts gathered up in front in a sort of pouch, in which reposed the irascible Fido, glaring defiance at all comers.

The lady rested one hand on Mr. Drew's shoulder, and with a little spring reached the ground with a "fwoof" of silk and muslin.

"Allow me!" said Jack once more, crooking his elbow still hat in hand.

The lady took his arm, a fascinating smile wreathing her richly-carmined lips and contracting the eyes which she had made large and liquid by the use of belladonna, still further brightening the effect by delicately penciling the edges of the lids. Then, while she ambled at his side with the teetering motion peculiar to camels and ladies in high-heeled boots, Jack let his admiring gaze rest on the fluffy hair which hid her forehead, dyed to that golden hue so much affected by the modern siren.

The approach of the stage-coach was enough to bring all the loungers to the hotel; but when the intelligence that it brought a petticoat was sent through the length and breadth of the camp by some mysterious telegraphy, picks and pans and cradles were abandoned, and the sud-

den and universal interest in those particular horses was something remarkable.

The lady looked about with pleased interest, and asked Jack, with a rising inflection of the voice:

"What do you call this place?"

"Egg Harbor, madam—Egg Harbor," replied Jack.

"A thousand miles from the sea?"

The lady arched her brows with amused surprise, and then lifted her eyes to Jack's with a bewitching smile.

"Waal, ma'am," he answered, smiling with her, "of course every place has got to have a handle of some kind; and I suppose the boys thought that they could git their tongues around that about as easy as anything else."

"Yes?" said the lady, with that vague upward inflection which has no particular meaning, but displays the teeth very nicely if they happen to be beautiful.

By this time they had reached the doorway, and Jack handed her over the threshold with a grand *salam*.

As she turned and bowed her acknowledgments to him, she included in her sweeping glance all of the men who were flocking to the common center from every direction.

Then she was taken in charge by the landlord, who in turn handed her over to a shock-headed girl, saying:

"Ef you'll be pleased to order your dinner, ma'am, we'll be gittin' it while you air removin' the dust of travel."

"And what may I have for dinner?"

"Oh! almost anything, ma'am."

"Chickens?" suggested the lady, rather dubiously.

"The which, ma'am?" asked the landlord, taking his scraggy chin in his hand, and inclining his head slightly toward her, but with his eyes fixed on the floor, in an attitude of profound meditation.

"Perhaps you haven't chickens?" faltered the lady.

"Waal, no, ma'am!—to be candid with ye, we hain't got no chickens—not at this season o' the year, ma'am."

And the landlord now lifted his eyes to those of his fair guest, with the earnestness of a man who, when he spoke deliberately, was careful to speak the exact truth.

"But," he went on, with that kindling of enthusiasm, that tenderness, with which a man brings forward that on which he particularly prides himself, "ef so be ye happen to like *hog-meat!*—ye kin believe me, ma'am, when I tell ye that we've got somthin' in *that* line as I kin recommend, not takin' no back seat fur nothin' as wallers on this hyar continent!"

"Thank you! I'm not partial to hog-meat!" said the lady, bridling with offended sensibilities.

The landlord looked hurt at her contemptuous rejection of his favorite viand, but also at a loss what to offer one whose palate did not incline to hog-meat.

"Maybe," he ventured with pathetic hesitancy—"maybe you'd find *corn* to yer likin'—homin'y, ma'am?"

"Y-y-e-e-s!—if it is nicely cooked. Have you any canned goods?"

"Canned goods!" repeated the landlord, to himself, as if this proposition required consideration. "M-m—no! I can't say that we have got any *canned* goods; an' that's a fact!"

"But you surely have something besides hominy?" cried the lady, in dismay.

"Oh, yes!" replied the landlord, brightening and rubbing his hands. "We kin give ye any amount o' taters, an'—"

"But is your butter good?"

"The which, ma'am?"

Once more mine host was brought up with a round turn.

"Butter! butter!" repeated the lady, impatiently. "Is it such a scarcity that you have forgotten its name?"

The landlord scratched his head while he considered the matter a moment. Then he said, slowly:

"Waal, ye see, I reckon, now, butter—that is to say, *cow's* butter—wouldn't keep very well, not in this climate—at this season o' the year, ma'am."

"But what in the world do you use, if not butter?"

"Waal, ma'am, most on us sops our bread in the grease o' the hog-meat, the which, of course, we wouldn't expect it of a lady like yourself as hain't the stummick fur the grunter in no shape. But then, ma'am, barrin' the grease, we've got a fu'st-class article in molasses—"

"On potatoes! We were speaking about something to eat with potatoes!"

"So we was, ma'am. You're right thar, an' no mistake."

With which frank acknowledgment he slipped by the real point at issue, with:

"The which you kin have 'em cooked any way you air pleased to say."

"Baked?" suggested the lady, consenting to waive the matter of dressing.

"M-m b'iled, ma'am—mostly b'iled," said the landlord.

"Well, we certainly are getting on very

nicely, so far. Hominy and boiled potatoes and molasses! I suppose you have coffee?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am! We kin give ye a bar'l o' coffee!"

"Sweetened with molasses?"

"Some is likin'er to go it plain, ma'am, with a dash o' whisky fur to take the curse off."

The lady laughed.

"I have no doubt that that is very aptly expressed! But you spoke of bread."

"Generally in the shape o' biscuit, ma'am—and," he went on, with a brightening as when he had offered hog-meat as a substitute for chickens, "short-cake!"

"Short-cake! How do you make it?"

"Waal," said the landlord, scratching his head once more, "I suppose it's like most short-cake. Thar's flour, an' water, an' salt, an' a gob o' lard, an' the usual raisin' o' soda, an'—"

"In short," interrupted the lady, "your short-cake is very much like your biscuit, except that it is baked in a larger loaf?"

"Waal, ma'am, I allow you're about' right thar, fur a sure-enough fact."

"And that is all, I suppose?"

"Waal, ma'am, ef thar is anythin' more, I ain't bekownst to it. I give ye that on the honor of a gentleman!"

"I place implicit confidence in your word, sir, in this matter. I will thank you for some hominy, a whole boiled potato, a little salt, and a cup of water. You needn't trouble about the other things. To tell you the truth, I haven't much appetite; and I shall probably have less the longer I have to think about it; so please don't keep me waiting."

"Ma'am, you shall be sarved in three shakes of a lamb's tail!"

His guest left him to follow the shock-headed handmaiden, who during this colloquy had been ogling her with great awe.

And now, in testimony of the deference shown to women in this western country, it is but fair to say that, had a man raised any question as to the fare offered by the Egg Harbor Hotel, the "head referee" of that establishment would have placed himself opposite the faultfinder, flanked a twelve-inch bowie with a revolver half as long as his arm on the table before him, and said:

"My Christian friend, in this hyar country, when we have grub set before us, we goes fur it without nary questions! Did I understand you to remark— No! I thought I must be mistaken! The best you've had this side o' Frisco? That's our reputation, sir. We always studies to please. More hog-meat? I'm glad to see ye enjoyin' it, sir. Thar was a tenderfoot as come along hyar last year, the which he hadn't no fondness fur hog-meat; so a piece as we persuaded him to eat sot on his stummick as heavy as lead, an' we gave him a high lot up yonder fur to take his time a digestin' of it. This hyar ain't no country fur a feller with a finikin' stummick, no how ye kin fix it."

Meanwhile Mr. Jack Drew had struck a graceful attitude just beside the door, standing with one leg thrown across the other, so that the toe of his fine boot rested on the ground—the admiration and envy of all less lucky fellows who came trooping up, not without some show of sheepishness.

When the lady had disappeared, leaving the landlord her slave as a man, yet sorely perplexed in the capacity of purveyor for her fastidious palate, which spurned hog-meat and even looked with suspicion on molasses in coffee—Mr. Drew turned sufficiently to look into the door over his shoulder, and clear his throat.

The landlord caught his eye, and went up to him.

"You're trottin' out yer silver to-day, ye onderstand," he said, with a pointed look into the landlord's eyes. "And thar's that can of desiccated meat in my plunder-box. You know, Pete Lane, that you deal out such dog's rations hyar that it stands an ordinary Christian in hand to travel with his own commissariat. But this hyar particular can, ye onderstand, you have jest found, the which you didn't know it was left. Along side of the can you will find a flask, with something in it that kin be taken without following it up with an antidote for bedbug poison. You kin pour it into a bottle of your own; but be sure you rinse the bottle out well first. And thar's Mrs. Folger;—you know she kin make biscuit without havin' 'em smell as strong of soda as a Chinese stinkpot, and coffee that doesn't bear so strong a resemblance to dishwater as that which you usually foist upon the traveling public. Perhaps ye had better git her to come and cook dinner fur ye to-day, and fetch over some o' the milk of that goat goat, that Matty Davison fassosed fur her when her baby was ailin'. This hyar's all yer own notion, Pete, ye onderstand."

"Jest as you say! jest as you say!" assented the landlord, hastily; and he disappeared toward the kitchen.

Few men could have dictated to him as Jack Drew had done; but Jack had an intent way of looking into the eyes of any one to whom he was "talking business" that usually checked any impulse to "jaw back."

When the lady in whose honor the domestic

economy of the Egg Harbor Hotel had been thoroughly revolutionized was summoned to dinner, she was very agreeably surprised.

Instead of the landlord in his shirt-sleeves, with a dirty towel over his arm, she found a neatly dressed woman in attendance. Although the table was without a cloth, a napkin was spread beneath her plate, and another lay neatly folded on it.

This last luxury of the elegant Mr. Drew had caused it to be said of him, that he not only "carried a nose-wiper in his pocket," but even "swabbed his mug on a towel when he bolted his grub."

The lady noticed that her own plate was served with silver, while the one opposite—the table was set for two—was flanked by plebeian steel.

Her curiosity as to who was to occupy it was soon satisfied by the appearance of Mr. Jack Drew, who took his place with a matter-of-course air, as if this was an ordinary state of things.

"I begin to think that we are in fairy-land," she said.

Jack bowed and elevated his brows inquiringly, with the conventional:

"Beg pardon!"

"Where have they conjured this spread from, after so unpromising a prospectus?"

"Oh! Pete's a better fellow than he looks."

She scanned his face searchingly; but it was as "child-like and bland" as that of any "heathen Chinese," when interrogated in a matter that he prefers not to understand.

The biscuits, instead of being the color of saffron and having that pungent odor with which the olfactories of travelers in the West are so offended, are an equal delight to the sight, smell and taste; while the coffee, served with goat cream, was hardly the worse for being sweetened with just a dash of molasses.

The finishing touch was put to this exceptional repast by what was unquestionably wine.

Charmed at every thing, the lady became quite animated and chatty; and when she was followed into the coach by Mr. Jack Drew, she smiled her pleasure so frankly that he was emboldened to take his seat beside her, instead of opposite.

As he gathered up the reins, Sam Seaver regarded the envious crowd gathered in front of the Egg Harbor Hotel, with one eye closed and his tongue thrust into his cheek.

"You are going on to Coyote?" they heard her ask, sweetly.

"I have business that way," was Mr. Jack Drew's grave reply.

Then Sam Seaver's whiplash shot out with a ringing crack, and the coach rolled away before a cloud of dust.

"Hang his business!" growled a disgusted witness of Jack's felicity.

The others heartily echoed the spirit of this sentiment, as they dispersed to their several claims; and Egg Harbor was under a cloud.

CHAPTER XXI.

SHADOW JIM IN HOT WATER.

BUT a far more cheerful air pervaded the coach. Jack was getting on swimmingly, when the lady began to question him about Coyote.

"Oh, yes!" he replied, "it's a rushing place. Only night before last they had a battle which brought the whole camp out of bed."

Whereupon he related the recent "unpleasantness."

"But have you any society at Coyote—any ladies?"

"W-waal," replied Jack, hesitatingly, "to tell you the truth, I don't believe that you will find many there quite to your taste. But then there's one—yes, there's one that might—"

"What of her?"

"Waal, now, really, that's hard to say. You see, there don't nobody know much of anything about her."

"Which isn't saying that nobody wishes to?"

"You hit it there! Most of the boys would be punching one another's heads over her, if she gave them any encouragement. But for my part, my interest has quite abated, if I ever had any in that quarter."

Then, while his eyes told her why the belle of Coyote had suffered such an eclipse in his regard, he described the Golden Serpent and her position in Coyote.

"But," she persisted, "if this severe lady has no favorite, are there none who show a special regard for her?"

"Oh, well, the boys have all had it, first or last, like the measles; but they have to be content with losing their money to her. The old hands have all thrown off, calling it no go. It's the new-comers that keep trying their luck. I believe the last they call "Shadow Jim."

Jack Drew looked at the lady and smiled quite innocently as he made this revelation.

With a slight inclination of the head and lifting of the eyebrows, she said:

"Ah! Poor fellow! No doubt he is quite infatuated!"

It was very cleverly done; but Jack Drew detected an accession of color to her delicately-rouged cheeks, and made a long leap at the truth.

"By Jove! He's her man; and she's come for him!" was Jack's reflection.

This discovery was far from being a sweet morsel, considering the hopes he had begun to entertain on his own account.

"How can I slaughter him?" was his next thought.

But dissembling his personal interest in the matter, he replied:

"Clean gone! But he don't get much sympathy. It's fun for the boys. They all know how it is themselves, you see."

So Shadow Jim was making such hot love to this lady that he had become the laughing stock of the whole camp!

At that her lips hardened, and her nostrils quivered slightly.

"A home shot!" said Jack to himself. "We'll give it time to soak in!"

In pursuance of this policy, he let the conversation flag for a while; and when he resumed it, it was with an observation on the scenery through which they were passing.

As the stage brought up before the City Hotel, he leaped to the ground and assisted the lady to alight, when who should be airing his person before the door but Shadow Jim himself!

"What! Maude!" he cried, springing forward.

Mr. Jack Drew turned upon him with a look of astonishment and displeasure, which gave the lady on his arm a most excellent opportunity to snub her recreant lover, if such was his relation, and such her pleasure.

But she said, with the most perfect ignoring of their recent conversation:

"My husband."

And to Jim, quite as sweetly:

"A gentleman who has been very courteous to me."

And back to Jack:

"I haven't the pleasure of your name, sir."

For an instant Shadow Jim's jaw dropped.

"My husband!" he repeated to himself, in dismay.

But Maude, as he had called her, shot a level glance into his eyes, so keen that it sent a thrill down to his toes.

"Something up!" he said to himself. "That look means business. What has she dropped onto? But maybe it's only bluff on general principles."

While he was extracting what comfort he could from this uncertainty, the elegant Mr. Jack Drew introduced himself by name with his usual inimitable grace.

It gave Jim time to recover himself, as Maude, with a woman's tact, intended.

"I am glad to know you, sir," he said, "and to have an opportunity to thank you for your kindness to my wife."

He said it "like a little man."

Maude rewarded him with a smile of reconciliation.

It was nothing to her, nor indeed to Jim himself, that Mr. Jack Drew overlooked the hand that he extended, as he bowed himself free, turning the lady over to the new claimant, and walking into the house.

But Shadow Jim was disgusted with himself. He, who prided himself on his manipulation of women so that none of them ever got any hold on him, had been bullied into complete subjection by the daring stand this one had taken.

"From this time on, I am her slave!" he groaned within himself, though he was all smiles without.

"But what in the world has brought you here?" he asked, even before he had her housed—as became a solicitous husband!

"No doubt you are as displeased as surprised to see me!" said Maude, with a pout.

"On the contrary, it is quite needless to say that I am delighted!" cried Jim, unblushingly.

"Well, I have come to take you home with me!" declared the lady, with a touch of defiant determination.

"And robbed me of the chance to show you how short a time I could bear to stay away from you!" said Jim, with the air of love's rebuke.

"Short!" cried the lady, with fine emphasis.

Jim cursed himself for make such a blunder.

"Of course it has seemed long to me," he said, trying to patch the matter up. "But you know it is only a week."

"Only a week! No doubt that seems very short to you!"

"Now, Maude!"

"Oh! you needn't 'Maude' me! You had quite forgotten me—you know you had! And I shall go back alone! You may stay—with—whoever you have found that pleases you so well! Oh! you have broke—broke—broken my heart! But it is a matter of perfect indifference to you! Oh! oh! oh! was there ever any one so wickedly—wickedly cruel!"

And, they being by this time in the house and alone, Shadow Jim had on his hands a woman who gave every promise of going into violent hysterics. She might scream, and fall on the floor, and kick, and raise the house, before she got through with it. And like all men, Jim hated a "scene" above every thing.

Before she "let up on him," she had reduced

him to a total wreck. All that she had heard about his flirtation—if so one-sided an affair can be called a flirtation—with the Golden Serpent came out. Of course he swore, by every oath with which jealousy was ever appeased, to the slanderous character of every count in the indictment. He would call this liar out, and make him eat his words, or put half a dozen slugs into his body!

This he fulminated so fiercely as he paced the room like a caged lion, that, with a woman's faith in the desperate character, when roused to anger, of the man who happens to hold the mastery over her heart, Maude became frightened lest he should rush forth to his death; for she had no doubt that the elegant Mr. Jack Drew, with his piercing eyes and his dyed mustache and goatee—all of which made him look very dangerous indeed—must be, beyond question, a "dead shot!"

Thereupon she began to beg him to let the matter rest, assuring him that she did not believe a word of what had been said, and that she knew that he had not had a thought that was not all her own.

But the more earnestly she pleaded with him, the more he raged and roared, until she clung to him in tears; whereupon he struggled to break her hold, that he might rush from the room and devour his defamer!

Then she suddenly desisted, clasping her hands over her heart, telling him, gaspingly, that he had killed her, and staggering with half-closed eyes, as if about to fall in a faint.

Of course he caught her; and of course she lopped over into his arms, "clean gone!"

The usual applications of water and friction, and a great deal of tender coaxing, and assurances that, in compliance with her wishes, he would forego his purpose of making mince-meat of the elegant Mr. Drew, brought her round to a state in which she lay in his arms like a wilted angel, and listened and responded faintly to his soft avowals of undying love and regret that he had ever parted from her side for an hour.

But we spare the reader the billing and cooing which follow these domestic cyclones as naturally as a golden sunset closes a stormy day.

As soon as she could spare him from her side, which was only after repeated assurances that he went away on the leaden feet of duty, to return on the wings of love, Jim went out to find Iron Despard, to send word through him to Tiger Dick explaining his unavoidable desertion.

Now Iron Despard had witnessed the meeting between Shadow Jim and the lady who claimed his allegiance, and had turned away in savage disgust, so as to avoid being presented to her. It will be readily believed, then, that Jim found him in no genial mood.

"I've only a minute to tell you that my goose is cooked!" said Jim, with a grimace of mock despair. "The arbitress of my fate has dropped down on me like a tailor presenting his bill to a bridegroom at the church door! It is her fixed determination to bear me away from temptation by the lug! Tell Dick that nothing less urgent than a lady-love or a deputy sheriff should tear me away from him at such a time; and if ever you see the Golden Serpent, swear to her that I sigh for her afar!"

Iron Despard bowed acquiescence without a smile.

Jim, who was nothing abashed by this cool reception of his humor, said:

"Good luck to your enterprise. May you strike a lead as easily worked, but not requiring such strict attention to business, as does that which now calls me away."

And with a sigh in the direction of the Golden Serpent, Jim cocked his hat over his eyes and walked off.

On his return trip that afternoon Sam Seaver found his late lady passenger and the captive truant awaiting him; but, strange to say, the elegant Mr. Jack Drew was not on hand to speed their departure.

On the following day Shadow Jim ran across Detective Farnsworth and a posse of men, and learned that they were on their way to make sure of the capture of the redoubtable Tiger Dick.

When informed that he must return to Coyote, Maude's suspicions flamed up, and she insisted on going back with him. He explained the urgency of the case, which would require him to make his way on horseback by a short cut across the mountains; and she knew at once—so she declared—that he was deceiving her. There was no time to argue the case. Before he could win her to compliance the opportunity might be gone. So, leaving her in violent, but ineffectual, hysterics, he dashed away to his duty to his friend.

Meanwhile, Iron Despard—on the day previous, be it understood, immediately after the departure of Shadow Jim in leash of Maude's apron-string—set out for Santa Fe to purchase the necessary outfit for himself and friends—the three champions constituting the whole party that was to go in search of the secret mine.

The sight of Shadow Jim's subjection to a

woman's will had wrought upon him like a red rag before an angry bull. It had set him to reviewing his own past life, until he worked himself into a frenzy of hatred toward all women, which was perhaps some extenuation, though no excuse, for an act of brutal inhumanity, to the narration of which we are now come.

As he emerged from the foot-hills upon the open prairie, where he was to join the Santa Fe trail, he suddenly found himself witness to one of those life-and-death chases which are all too common on the border.

The pursued were a lady, whose terror-whitened face bore evidence of that delicacy and refinement which makes the American women of the higher class unrivaled by any of her sisters the world over; a man, whose rollicking air and dress marked him as a Rocky Mountain stage-driver; and an infant, which he bore in his arms. They were mounted on a pair of coach-horses, whose dangling harness showed that they had been hurriedly cut loose from the stage to meet a most desperate emergency.

One glance at the dusky visages and barbaric paraphernalia of the pursuers—one throb of the ear set ringing with their blood-curdling yells—left nothing for words.

CHAPTER XXII.

WOMAN'S LOVE.

HEY! presto, pass! and we are back again on the Atlantic seaboard.

Morning dawned over the sleeping metropolis, making a rosy twilight in the luxuriously-curtained apartment where the Sportive Sport had taken such painful leave of his loved ones.

The woman moved in her sleep, stretching forth her arm with an inarticulate, caressing murmur. She did not know that it failed to find what it sought until her baby stirred, and set up a piping cry.

She gathered it to her bosom with instinctive mother-love, even before she roused to consciousness. Then her eyes opened on the nestling, but even as she crooned to it soothingly, she felt the silence and chill of her desolation.

With startling abruptness, her eyes flashed up to the empty place beside her.

"Ned!" she cried breathlessly, putting out her hand as if to have double assurance that she was indeed alone.

Then she sprang upright, crying to herself pantedly:

"Why, he has not been home!"

Shaking in every limb, she fairly scrambled out of bed, and hugging her baby to her bosom as if to shield it from some intangible terror, she ran to the communicating door and threw it open, crying:

"Ned—oh, Ned! I am so frightened!"

She expected to be received into his arms, and comforted and soothed and laughed at—oh, for the glad sound of his teasing laughter!—for her cowardice. She was prepared to scold him, very gently, with little hysterical sobs and clinging hands that would show him that was love and not anger that prompted her words.

But the dressing-room was empty, with the gas aglimmer, just as she had left it the night before.

For a time she stared into the room, her eyes dilating, her face whitening, her lips apart. Then she crept back and sat on the edge of the bed, and hugging her baby close to her bosom, dropped her face over it, and so crouched in mute anguish of soul.

Had it come to this, that he would choose to stay away from her, careless of her suspense?

Reviewing their one year of wedded life, this was what she saw:

It had begun with every promise of happiness. Her guardian, old Jasper Haveland, whose soft heart was constantly giving the lie to his crabbed tongue, had endowed her handsomely on her marriage with his nephew, all the while growling that the young dog would no doubt wheedle her out of it, squander it, and leave her to go to the poor-house in the end.

Smiling up into his face with her arms about his neck, she had called him a dear old bear; and then, before the tears of gratitude which she had left on his beard had ceased to glisten, she had, with a fond wife's confidence, and perhaps as the old man had expected and wished, placed her whole fortune in her husband's hands.

With it he had gone into the stock market; and from time to time whispers of his success had reached her, making her heart leap—not because it was predicted that he was to be a wealthy man, but because he was showing his power to cope with the giants of finance.

Now she lifted her head to gaze about on her desolation. Her roving eye fell upon a letter lying on the pin-cushion on her dressing-table.

With a low glad cry she sprang forward and seized upon it, carrying it to her lips and kissing it with happy, cooing laughter and a rush of self-reproachful tears.

"Oh! this will explain all, of course! The dear fellow has been in, and finding me asleep, refrained from waking me! As if I cared for

sleep or anything else, when he has anything to say to me! But what can have called him away to stay all night? It cannot be bad news, or he would have trusted to nothing but his own dear lips to break it to me gently! Ah! my darling!"

But, though these thoughts flashed through her nimble brain like lightning, her eager eyes were by this time speeding along the lines and drinking in the bitter meaning that was to poison her peace, causing the roseate glow of happy tenderness—the reaction after her misery—to slowly fade from her face and cheeks and lips, until they were as wan as lilies!

How breathlessly she swept through that fiery record! But she had not reached the end when she leaped to her feet with a shriek of terror.

"He has gone away!" she cried in a hoarse whisper, pressing the crumpled letter to her bosom, and staring straight before her. "Oh! that cannot be!—it is too cruel!"

She began to pace the room like a caged animal.

The baby set up a wailing cry from the bed where she had laid it.

She ran to it and hugged it to her bosom, rocking her body to and fro, and moaning as if her heart were breaking.

Then, as fast as she could read through her blinding tears, she addressed herself to the letter every word of which was a separate stab.

Page after page he had poured out his heart in an incoherent medley of remorse and tenderness. How bitterly had he fulfilled his uncle's prophecy! It was gone—all gone! He had beggared her! He could not face the old man's just wrath; but most of all, he could not meet her forgiveness.

He had gone back to the life where he knew that he could retrieve his lost place among men, leaving her to the care of his uncle, her late guardian, whose place he had so ill supplied. When he felt that he had the right to cast himself at her feet and ask her to try him again, he would return. She must teach their child—

And there the writing ended, and the sheet was blistered with tears.

She pressed it to her lips and eyes and bosom, and snatched up the baby and rained tears and kisses all over it, because it was all that she had left of him.

"Struggle all alone out in that desolate wilderness! Never! never! Does he fancy that I could stay here in comfort while he was pining in exile? How little he knows our love, my baby! my baby! But we will go to him without an hour's delay, and show him that he has paid us a very poor compliment by running away from us and breaking our hearts; won't we, my pet? Oh! I should have staid out there with him in the life that he was used to, and never brought him here, where everything is so artificial and heartless."

She called her maid, was dressed, and, driving to old Jasper Haveland's hotel, found him in bed suffering with gout, and therefore in his most bearish mood.

"Hoity-toity! and what's the row now?" he exclaimed, at sight of her. "Has that young vagabond been breaking your heart? It's just what I've been expecting any time these twelve months!"

In the preoccupation of her grief she did not stop to consider his condition, but poured forth her pitiful story, putting the fact of her husband's desertion first.

At that old Jasper Haveland gave his tongue the rein; and the loyal wife was fairly stunned with the torrent of vituperation he heaped upon her husband.

Shrinking back with her baby hugged to her bosom, she cried:

"Do you forget that you are talking about your nephew and the father of my child?"

"Forget?" bellowed the old fellow. "I would to God I had never remembered the infamous scoundrel! Why did I not leave him to his vagabond life, and be hanged to him? If I had only known that I was hunting up some one to break your heart, I would have seen him in Tophet!"

"He has not broken my heart!" cried the wife, with loyal indignation. "All the happiest moments in my life I owe to him! But there is no use in talking further in this way. I have come to tell you that I am about to follow him the next train."

"Follow him? Follow that graceless knave?" shouted the old soldier.

"Yes," replied the wife firmly. "I have sent a telegram which will intercept him at Chicago, so that he will expect me. I came to ask you to accompany me; but after your cruel abuse I would never consent to his wife receiving any favors from you!"

"We'll see about that!" cried Mr. Haveland, stoutly. "I'll do you a favor that will be to some purpose. I'll follow the rascal and shoot him—hang me if I don't!"

And suiting the action to the word, he proceeded to get out of bed without more ado. But he had no sooner put his foot to the floor than the excruciating pain made him howl lustily.

"Fo' de Lo'd high golly!" cried his faithful henchman, Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs, springing forward, "all ashake," as he would

have said, with fright. "Jist you go 'way, Missy Habbilan'. 'Twon't do fur to 'cite him dis away, nobow—'deed 'twon't. Now, massa, jist you let ole Sam fix ye. Dab, now, we'll hab ye all right ag'in in jist no time at all."

While he was being put back in bed the gouty old chap alternately execrated his foot and his servitor.

Forgetting her anger, his one-time ward laid her child on the lounge and sprang to his assistance.

"Oh, dear guardie!" she cried, recurring to the old title of endearment, "let us not part in anger. I am truly sorry for the pain I must leave you in; but I cannot delay. I must go to him at once. You do not know what he is suffering. You have not seen the despairing letter he wrote to me."

And so she poured out all sorts of excuses and palliations—far more than the delinquent merited, no doubt; but then, if we got only our deserts, how would the best of us fare!

But old Jasper Haveland would not be placated; and his harsh strictures roused her anger again. So, bridling proudly, she said:

"Very well, then! If you will persist in your unjust pitilessness, I cannot longer listen to you. This is a final good-by, as we may never meet again."

Now, then, the old fellow began to swear without restraint; and seeing her preparing to go, he shouted to his servant:

"Lock that door, you black rascal, and bring the key to me!"

"Stand out of my way!" cried Stella, advancing upon the distracted Julius with an imperious flash of the eye that made him quail.

"Do you think that I am a child to be restrained against my will?"

"Fo' de L'd, Missy Habbilan', don't r'ile de ole massa!" pleaded Julius. "He'll take it out o' dis hyer chile, ef ye do. Jist wait tell we git him comf'able like. Ye know he al'ays comes roun' in de en'."

But time was pressing. To miss her train seemed to her like losing all. So, in spite of her former guardian's furious commands to his servant, she put him to one side and left the hotel.

She was driven to her own home for the trunk that was now packed, and thence to the depot.

And now fate frustrated her plans by decreeing that an accident should delay the sending of her telegram, until her husband had passed Chicago. She was not informed of the fact; but when he failed to meet her, such was her confidence in him that she at once divined the truth. So she kept on to the prairie metropolis.

There she got track of him, and followed him south toward Santa Fe, by coach, making inquiry all along the line.

She was thus proceeding one sultry day across a stretch of prairie, the only occupant of the stage, when the swaying vehicle was brought to an abrupt stand, and the driver swung from his seat and appeared at the door.

"Kin you ride boss-back, ma'am?" he asked, excitedly.

"What is the matter?" she cried, starting forward.

"Injuns—Apaches!" was the laconic answer. "Kin you ride? I'll take yer young'un. But we've got to git, and that right smart. Thar ain't no use o' tryin' to pull the heases through. Speak quick! They're right hyar."

Even as he spoke her ear was greeted by a chorus of blood-curdling yells; and gazing out of the coach window she saw a line of wild warriors goading their horses at full speed to intercept the coach.

"Yes! yes! I can ride," she answered, handing her baby to him and hastily alighting.

He disengaged the traces, mounted her on one horse and leaped to the back of the other.

"Now jist keep cool an' hold on," he directed.

And he goaded the horses to so wild a run that it seemed to her as if she must be thrown at every leap.

On came the Apaches, yelling and lashing their horses.

In that mad dash she could not look back. She held her breath and clung on for dear life.

Tom Doby on the other hand measured the lessening distance with anxious eye.

Just above the head of one of the horses appeared a puff of white smoke. Then came a sharp report, followed by a zip close at hand.

"I am detaining you!" cried the mother.

"Leave me, and save my child! Oh! dear sir, if you can make better time alone, abandon me!"

"Hang on an' don't waste yer breath!" replied Tom, grimly.

He was thinking:

"It's good-by fur the lot of us, ur I lose my guess!"

It seemed as if his gloomy prognostic was to prove true; for the savages were slowly yet surely gaining ground.

Again and again they fired, until his horse leaped into the air with a shriek of pain, and fell in a heap.

With a scream of terror the mother drew in her horse and leaped to the ground. She would not leave her child.

Tom Doby ran the distance she had gained, and catching her up without a "with your leave or by your license," swung her to the back of her horse again.

There was no time for ceremony. It was neck or nothing. She must not only retain her position, but hold her child. There was only one position in which she could do both, and in that position she found herself before she could catch breath.

The next instant her child was placed in her arms.

"Hang on! Now, look out!" cried Tom; and the next instant, goaded by a prod with his bowie, the horse leaped forward and coursed away over the prairie.

She knew that she had her treasure in her arms; she felt that she was being swept away as on the wings of the wind; she heard the yelling savages in her rear; she realized, too, that this rude fellow had sacrificed his life to save hers and that of her child, if possible.

All these facts went eddying through her mind like leaves caught up in a whirlwind; but blinded by the rush of air she shut her eyes, clung convulsively to her baby with one arm, and had the other hand clutched firmly in the horse's mane, and so waited breathlessly.

Behind her, brave Tom Doby leaped back to his fallen horse, and throwing himself down behind the body as a breastwork, and aiming his carbine over it, he opened fire on the approaching savages.

Instantly they scattered to circle round him, when, gaining his rear, he would be without protection.

And just within the cover, where the smooth bosom of the prairie rose into uplands, sat a gloomy-browed horseman, witness to this act of heroic devotion.

It was Iron Despard!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MAN'S HATE.

Now Iron Despard, as we have said, had worked himself into a state which bordered very closely upon insanity, so he gave not a second glance to the woman flying with her child—all her little world—within the circle of her arms. But his natural humane instincts prompted him to succor the man so sorely beset; and besides, far from being deterred by considerations of personal danger, the frenzy that seethed in his brain goaded him to rush upon death as a maniac leaps into the fire.

Putting spurs to his horse, he dashed straight for the line of savages who were skirting Tom Doby's flank nearest him.

His bridle-rein hung loose on his horse's neck, and he held a revolver in either hand. The moment he came within pistol range he opened a scathing fire; and, inspired with superstitious terror by his fierce aspect and his reckless boldness which seemed to court death, the Indians scattered and fled before him as before a pursuing devil.

Abandoning them, he sped across the plain to where Tom Doby was engaged in a hot contest.

Again the fury of the assault swept everything before it. Then he returned to the stage-driver, not caring whether the savages followed on after the woman or not.

He found brave Tom Doby breathing his last, have given his life for another.

"The lady?" gasped Tom.

"Let me see if anything can be done for you," said Iron Despard, frowning determinedly.

"But the lady—have you saved her?" persisted the stage-driver, endeavoring to lift his head, that he might look about for her.

"Hang the lady!" cried Iron Despard—in deference to "ears polite" we euphemize his savage oath—irritated by this insistence. "We have something of greater importance on hand, just now. Where are you hurt?"

The wounded man stared at him blankly. It was some time before he could realize the deliberate abandonment of his passenger to her fate. When he did, he ascribed it to intense personal hatred. But to carry even revenge to such an extent was so monstrous, that he shrank with loathing from the hand that would have succored him.

"No! no!" he gasped, huskily. "Don't touch me! I suppose life is as much to me as to any man; but I wouldn't take it from your hands. When the Sportive Sport asks you how you left the man that tried as long as there was life in his body to defend his wife, tell him that my last word to you was that I considered you a cowardly hound!"

Iron Despard stood erect, with folded arms, gazing down at the speaker, not at all, to outward appearance, affected by his taunt.

Heroic Tom Doby lay gasping feebly, and rapidly bleeding to death.

"I'd rather have—my body—as full of—holes as it is—than your so—soul!" he panted, fixing his gaze sternly upon the face that bent above him.

Then his eyes slowly glazed over; and he was gone to his reward!

What prompted Iron Despard's next action? If it was respect for the man who had reproved

him with his last breath, he did not take the reproof home and act upon it.

Lifting the inanimate body, he placed it on his horse, and bearing it to the hills, laid it in a depression, and covered it with a cairn of rocks.

Then he went on his way immersed in moody thought.

That the fugitive was the wife of his colleague was no recommendation to his protection, but rather the reverse. He recalled the cadence of bitterness he had heard in the Sportive Sport's voice. No doubt he had the best of reasons for leaving her—perhaps the same that had sent Despard himself once more adrift in the world, his soul torn by raging passions. Small thanks to the man who would hang her again like a millstone about his neck!

Thus reasoning within himself, he turned a sharp angle of rock, and found himself face to face with the woman and her child, riding between two captors!

With a shriek she slipped from her horse, and rushed to his side, crying:

"Oh! save me, sir!—save me from these terrible creatures!"

But long before she could accomplish this—indeed, the instant that he saw them, and before her captors could lift a finger in menace or self-defense—he had plucked forth and cocked his revolver, crying:

"Hands up!"

And they, knowing the peril of his deadly aim, had obeyed, and were completely at his mercy.

Then had come her shriek of delirious joy—the rebirth of hope—and her flight to him, her savior!

But let us take the moment of breathless suspense that followed to narrate how all this came about.

Finding himself so well mounted that he did not fear pursuit, Joe Moran made his way directly to the stage route running between Denver and Santa Fe. Here at a station he found Mrs. Edward Haveland; the inquiries she made at every step made her story the theme of general gossip; he at once conceived a plot which would cripple his enemies, by dividing their force, if nothing more; and in less than an hour he had collected a party of ruffians who were ready for any fiends' work, so long as they were paid for it.

They were men who were in the habit of hunting together, like a pack of wolves; and they had every appliance for the successful prosecution of their infamous trade. As it served them to disguise their race, they frequently masqueraded as Indians. Then, the more atrocious their work, the less the danger of discovery.

Thus disguised, they went in pursuit of the coach which contained Mrs. Haveland; and we have seen their success.

As Tom Doby was nothing to them, they were glad to leave him to the man who had come to his aid, while they continued their pursuit of the woman and child who alone were necessary to their purpose.

They overtook and secured her; and then, while Moran and another hurried her away to a place of concealment until he could use her for the attainment of his ends, they sent the rest back to ambush the way in case they should be followed—which they fully expected.

Had Iron Despard gone directly on, he would inevitably have fallen a victim to their murderous weapons; but the departure from the route to bury brave Tom Doby made it to his advantage to take another trail; and by this means he passed round the ambush and came upon those who had the prisoner in charge, taking them wholly unware.

He only anticipated their assault when he ordered them to throw up their hands. It was but a matter of self-protection, though both captive and captors accredited him with a more generous sentiment.

As Mrs. Haveland approached him, he reined his horse away from her with a frown of unmistakable hatred.

"Do not touch me, woman!" he cried, as, weeping and laughing together in the almost insane delight that thrilled her mother's bosom, she held her child up to him. "Do you fancy that I would strike a blow in defense of such a thing as you?"

His intense scorn of look and intonation was like a blow in the face.

The unhappy woman shrank back, staring at him in dismay. Then a possible interpretation of his demeanor occurred to her, and she cried:

"Oh, sir! but you cannot understand! I am the wife of Edward Haveland. He is well known all through this country. You must have heard of him. Believe me—I am an honorable woman—a loved and honored wife!"

"Ha-a-h! no doubt!" he laughed, with savage scorn. "You are all honorable women—until you are found out! Oh, yes! you are loved and trusted! There is no limit to human credulity—until you teach us what fools we are! Fough! why bandy words with you! Stand aside, I say!"

"But you cannot abandon me to these wretches?"

"Practice your arts on them! Ha! ha! I

fancy that you will find them rather insensible to the glamour which you cast over those of your own race!"

Into the mother's tortured heart came an intuitive sense of the state of mind from which this man's inhumanity must spring. For a moment she thought him mad; but now she saw that some woman must have wronged him bitterly, for which he was making her pay the penalty.

Joe Moran had at first stared in open-mouthed astonishment; but as the real state of affairs dawned upon him, he could with difficulty repress a grin of delight.

"By Judas!" he cried, within himself, "if I had the making of this, I couldn't fix it more to my mind! All I ask is that he shall stick to his text, and then let me git away! If I don't make it warm for the Immortal Three!"

And he would have rubbed his hands in glee, but for the necessity of keeping them extended above his head.

Meanwhile the mother entertained a last hope.

"But my child!" she cried, holding it toward him supplicatingly, at arm's-length. "At least save that! See! a baby cannot have injured you! What is more innocent? You cannot refuse—"

He snatched it from her roughly, by the arm, though its scream of pain and fright made her clasp her hands, and wail:

"Oh! have mercy! have mercy!"

"What is the sex of the brat?" he growled.

The mother pressed her hands to her heart, while her tear-streaming eyes rested piteously on his face. She now knew that there was no hope for even an infant that would develop into a woman who might some day betray a man's confidence.

So great was the issue hanging upon her answer, that for a moment she could not speak. Alas! that woman's weakness betrayed her. Before she opened her lips, Iron Despard knew the truth.

"It is a boy," she said. "Take it to Edward Haveland. You may know him under the name of the Sportive Sport."

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed, bitterly. "Ever the same! You lie! It comes so much easier to you than the truth!"

And he tossed the child back to her, almost knocking her down with the impetus of its body.

"It is a girl!—it is a girl!" she cried. "But have you no heart? Mercy! mercy!"

He turned away from her, heedless of her anguish.

All this while he had kept his eye on the supposed Indians too warily for them to venture an attempt at his life. Now he gave them his whole attention, frowning blackly upon them.

Suddenly, without the slightest intimation of his purpose, he fired at the one nearest to him; and an instant later at the other. But this momentary warning "saved the bacon" of lucky number two. At the first shot he slipped from his horse, so that his body was in motion when his turn came.

The first one never so much as lowered his arms. As the bullet pierced his heart, his horse reared, throwing him over backward. But though the second was wounded, he sprang to the side of the road, and made his escape among the rocks and underbrush.

This act for a moment revived hope in the mother's breast. In spite of his harsh words, he might intend to rescue her and her child. But when he dug spurs into his horse's flanks and dashed away down the road, the reaction struck like a spear to her heart, and with a moan she sunk to the ground.

Returning, Joe Moran—for he was the lucky man—found his captive still in his power; and a moment later he was joined by those who had lain in ambush, and who were attracted to the spot by the sounds of battle.

His story, as incredible as it appeared at first sight, was corroborated by so many circumstances not accordant with the theory of a fight between him and his companion, that it was accepted.

In spite of a very painful wound, he was in great glee.

"Gents!" he cried, "this knocks the three of a kind—see if it don't!"

And he laid before them his plans for the future.

Meanwhile Iron Despard kept on his way, transacted his business with a dispatch which was characteristic of him, and returned to Mulligan's Bend.

A warm reception awaited him!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DUELLO.

WHEN Mrs. Haveland recovered consciousness, she found herself no longer in the power of savages, but of white men scarcely less to be dreaded.

"Now, ma'am," said Joe Moran, in a tone meant to be coaxing, at the same time that it had a ring of "business" underlying it, "all we want is to be sensible, an' not to make no trouble,

an' to take things easy, an' it'll all come out right in the end."

"My child!—where is my child?" gasped the mother, not heeding his words, but starting up and gazing about wildly.

"Now that's all right, ma'am. Jest you—"

"My baby! my baby! What have you done with her? Give me my child first, and then I will listen to you."

"Waal, ma'am," said Joe, slowly, thrusting his hands in his pockets with an air which said that he proposed to maintain his position as master of the situation, "I allow that you'll do the thing my way. Ef so be you ain't quite ready fur to talk business, why I reckon I kin wait. I was always an obligin' cuss—ef I have one partic'lar fault above another, it is that—and especially perlit to the ladies."

And drawing a pipe from his pocket, he proceeded to cut up some plug tobacco in his palm, which, after rolling it with his thumb, he packed into the bowl of the pipe for smoking.

"Ob, sir!" cried Mrs. Haveland, "consider that I am a poor distracted mother! I will try to be calm and reasonable. Of course I should thank you for rescuing me from those cruel savages; but, oh! if you have not my child as well, I shall wish that you had left me to die with her!"

"The kid is all right, ma'am; an' ef you'll mind what ye'r told to do, you shall have her back ag'in assound as a dollar. But ef you go to rampagin' around—"

"Oh! I will do anything you say!"

"Now ye'r talkin'! See that ye don't furgit it."

"But you will let me see my baby?"

"Not jest yet, ma'am. Ye see, we didn't want no screechin' an' sich; so we jest provided fur her keep until you had tended to a leetle biz that we had fur you to do."

"What is it? Speak quickly!" pleaded the wretched mother.

"Waal, ma'am, ye see, a chap named Iron Despard—the same, by the way, what treated ye so scand'lous when he might have got ye away from the Injuns jest as easy as not; which the same you would be with 'em now ef it hadn't been fur me an' my pard's comin' along jest then—waal, ma'am, this ornery cuss, Iron Despard, havin' dropped onto a leetle dockment what belongs by rights to yer humble servant, got Tiger Dick an' the Sportive Sport—yer husband, ma'am—to jine him fur to beat me out o' that same dockment aforesaid. But ye can't bornswaggle yer uncle, ye onderstand—not while he's awake! Ef I can't come back at ye one way, ye'll find me gittin' in my work somewhar else. He holds three of a kind—I'm allowin' that; but I calculates as how I kin show up a mighty sizable pair!—which the same air you, ma'am, an' the kid."

"And you propose to hold my child and me as hostages for the return of the paper?"

"You've jest about said it, ma'am, the which you've got a head on ye fur business what's worth somethin'! But thar's more than that in this thing. Ef you go to the Sportive Sport an' tell him the how that thar slouch left ye—an' more especially the kid—in the hands o' the Injuns, thar'll be trouble in camp, an' don't ye furgit it! That knocks their three of a kind, an' leaves a clear course fur We, Us & Co. Now all ye have to do, is to go to Mulligan's Bend an' tell the Sportive that it is a squar' trade—the kid fur the dockment."

"Go and leave my child?"

"To the best of care ma'am, till ye git back."

But the mother grew distracted with fear, and began to plead in frantic terms.

Joe Moran coolly crossed his legs and drew meditatively on his pipe.

"The sooner ye come round, ma'am, to my way o' doin' the thing, the less time the kid'll have to yell her leetle head off. Ef she gits sick, ma'am, with cryin' while you're keepin' her waitin', don't blame me—the which I'm the kind-heartedest man ye most ever see, an' am sayin' this hyar fur your good."

That kind of argument brought her into perfect accord with his wishes; and he sent her to Mulligan's Bend, saying in conclusion:

"Jest tell the Sportive that when he gits the dockment all he's got to do is to come to this hyar spot alone—don't furgit that—alone, an' he'll find the kid awaitin' fur him. But ef he tries to play any shenanigan on us, we'll send him her scalp as a keepsake, fur to remember what a doggone fool he was. It'll stand you in hand, ma'am, ef you care anything fur the young'un, to see to it yerself that he figures the thing all straight."

With this threat making her heart quail, she went on her way.

When she reached Mulligan's Bend, they told her that the Sportive Sport was away looking at some improved machinery in one of the mines. As she was so weak that she could hardly stand, she went into the hotel to wait until he could be sent for.

When told that his wife had followed him to this wild country, the Sportive Sport turned deathly pale; then with a swelling heart he hurried to her side.

Rushing into her presence, he fell on his knees at her feet.

"Ned! Ned!" she cried, and throwing her arms about him, she dropped her face on the head he had bowed in her lap.

"I don't ask you to forgive me!" he murmured. "But, oh, my wife! my injured darling!"

"There! there! let us not speak of that! We have something so terrible in the present that we have no time to waste on the past."

Thereupon she told him the situation.

His fears for his child, his solicitude for her, were only equalled by his indignation toward Iron Despard.

He rose with a stony look on his face that filled her with terror.

"Oh! what more is to fall upon me?" she cried. "You will not fight with this man! He will kill you without compunctions! Oh, Ned! buy this paper from him, and let us get our child and go away in peace!"

Her husband replied to her in a quiet, evenly-modulated tone:

"Lie down, dear. You need rest. I will attend to this matter without difficulty."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I shall be governed by circumstances."

"But you will not—"

"Do not trouble me now. I must devise a way to make sure of our child before all else."

With gentle authority he assisted to undress her and put her to bed. Then he induced her to take a sedative.

One moment he hung over her, with his arms about her.

"Say that you forgive me!" he whispered; and she felt a tear fall on her face with his penitential kiss.

She tightened the clasp of her arms about his neck, as she murmured:

"Oh, my darling! how fully, how freely, for everything but for doubting me! How could you leave me? You knew that everything was as nothing compared with that!"

"And can you ever trust me again?"

"Have I not proved it by following you?"

"Ah, dear one! I never deserved such love!"

She laughed a low, cooing murmur, as she pressed him closer and closer, and kissed him more and more lingeringly.

"My only concern is that I have not more to give you!"

"There! sleep in peace! When you wake, you shall find your baby once more safe in your arms."

"God give her back to us, safe and well!" breathed the mother.

Then he left her, and she slept, secure in her confidence in him.

From the chamber in which his wife lay in narcotized slumber, the Sportive Sport went in quest of Tiger Dick and Six-foot Si.

Without preface and heedless of the curious crowd that gathered about, he told them of Iron Despard's act of monstrous inhumanity.

The crowd was prompt in its denunciations. Six-foot Si, who never "went back on a friend" while there was a shred of worthiness left on which to pin his loyalty, turned very pale and grave.

"Hold on, gents!" he said, frowning upon the crowd. "You're always ready to kick a man when he is down. Suppose, now, you wait till you've byearred the other side? Onderstand," he went on, turning to the Sportive Sport, "that ain't to say that the lady has said anything but jest what happened; but every man has a right to be heard in his own defense. You'll all allow that."

Tiger Dick's indignation was silent, but deep. He said nothing before the crowd; but his lips were compressed, and his eyes burned with a slumberous fire.

Even before he spoke, the Sportive Sport knew that he had in him a man who would stand by him to the end.

"What do you mean to do about it?" he asked, when he had drawn the Sportive Sport a little aside.

"I purpose to fight him in the middle of the street here; and I do not mean to let any consideration of property rights prejudice the safety of my child. Its danger has come through this accursed cipher; and its safety shall be purchased with it, if I have to tear his heart out along with it!"

"You may rest easy, if you fall," said the Tiger, quietly. "He will then have another to settle with; and unless he gets away with me too, I promise to look after the safety of your wife and child."

At that the Sportive Sport extended his hand impulsively.

It was clasped with a firmness with which men pledge themselves to one another.

A little later Iron Despard made his appearance, on his return from Sante Fe, with all arrangements complete for the trip which the Three of a Kind would now never take in company.

He rode into the camp quite indifferent to the frowns that saluted him on every side. He did not trouble himself to guess what had caused the change in sentiment since his departure. He knew that he would shortly be informed.

As he coolly dismounted, throwing the bridle-

rein over a post, the Sportive Sport stepped forth from the crowd before the hotel.

"My wife has just made her appearance," he said.

"Ah?" answered Iron Despard, carelessly.

Edward Haveland's eyes flashed, and his nostrils dilated and quivered.

"Have you no explanation to make?" he demanded, evidently with an effort to check the expression of his indignation.

"None whatever!" replied Iron Despard, neither defiantly nor sneeringly, but with quiet determination.

"Then I demand the reparation which one gentleman accords another whom he has injured!"

"You shall not be denied, sir."

"Gentlemen," said the Sportive Sport, turning to the spectators, "there need be few preliminaries. The street is handy. All I ask is that we step far enough away not to disturb my wife, who is sleeping."

"Is it possible," said Iron Despard, also turning to the crowd, "that I have at least one friend in Mulligan's Bend, who will consent to serve me in a matter of this kind?"

"You have me," said Six-foot Si, stepping forward. "But—but there *must* be some word that will make a leetle better showin' in this hyar case. Don't be too proud to speak. Colonel Dangerfield couldn't do so cowardly a thing as that without—"

Iron Despard interrupted him with an icy smile.

"I see you think well of me—no doubt far better than I deserve. Thank you! But I have nothing to add to whatever the lady has told you."

"But my God!" cried Si, in a sort of desperation; for it was not a slight matter to give up the ideal of manly courage with which he had invested Iron Despard, who had stood to him for all that a man and a gentleman should be, "men don't treat white women like this for nothing!"

Iron Despard bowed to him with a smile such as that with which we indulge the undue enthusiasm of a friend.

"We shall not better the situation by discussion," he said. "This seems to be a case in which a man has treated a 'white' woman, as you say, in the way you deprecate. Come, gentlemen! we are wasting time."

Then turning to the Sportive Sport, he bowed and said:

"I am entirely at your service. With you, I think that merely formal preliminaries may be dispensed with."

"If you will please to follow me!"

And the two walked down the street, with the crowd at a respectful distance behind.

The duello as practiced in the West is a very informal affair. When men are in earnest they do not stand on ceremonious parade.

There was no calling upon the seconds to examine or see to the loading of the weapons. Each man used his own, and saw that it was in proper order. The only use for Tiger Dick on one hand and Six-Foot Si on the other, was that there might be some one to carry off the field the man who should fall.

Even the distance was measured informally with the eye, the men taking their positions at will. Neither was particular enough on what they considered a trifling detail to make a point of it. They were used to firing at all distances.

The Sportive Sport looked stern, yet perfectly calm. He was fully resolved to punish the indignity to his wife and the unnecessary peril to which his child was still exposed.

A bitter, satirical smile sat on Iron Despard's face, as if it were graven in stone. He was thinking how, in the face of his own recent experience, he had allowed himself to be won over by Bob Cady's sweetheart. Her letters, written in tears and anguish, had convinced him of her truth, in spite of his prejudice; and he had undertaken this enterprise only that he might reunite the lovers, if only Bob's life was spared, and lift her above grudging want if her lover was taken away from her by death. Then had come the mockery of fate. A woman was thrown between him and his purpose. The evil in him was made to defeat the good.

Well, he washed his hands of the whole tangled affair! For the rest, death would be a relief from the misery that made a hell of his wrecked life.

The principals stood face to face; the spectators ranged themselves on either side, leaving the street clear from end to end.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" asked Tiger Dick.

No reply was returned; but the men fixed their eyes on each other.

An instant of deathlike silence ensued; to be followed by the clear, metallic command:

"One! two! three!—fire!"

The right arm of either combatant went up like a lever; and the instant they reached the line of the eye, two simultaneous flashes and puffs of smoke were followed by a blended report, and the arms fell again together.

For one breathless instant both stood firm,

and the crowd began to think that neither had been hit. Then Iron Despard fell forward on his face like a log!

CHAPTER XXV.

SOUL TO SOUL ONCE MORE.

THE Sportive Sport walked deliberately over to his fallen foe, turned him over, thrust his hand into his breast, and drew forth the cryptogram.

He then turned to the crowd, as pale and stern as he had been ever since he had learned of the disdainful denial of his wife's plea for protection, but otherwise as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is the cause of my child's peril. When the man before you had it in his power to save a helpless infant and its mother with no risk to himself, he refused to do it. This has now become the price of my child's safety. Does any one present deny my right to it?"

They all understood what that meant. Any man who expressed an adverse opinion would be expected to back it in the one way known to such cases. Whatever their notions of abstract justice, no one cared enough for Bob Cady's interests to maintain them at the mouth of the revolver.

Accepting their silence for what it really stood for—that he would not be interfered with in his appropriation of the cipher—he thrust it into his pocket and, being joined by Tiger Dick, while Six-foot Si went to the assistance of his fallen principal, walked down the street toward the hotel.

"Are you hurt?" asked the Tiger.

"No. I heard the whiz of the bullet by my head."

Nothing further was said, so it is impossible to tell whether either of them had a suspicion of the truth, which was that Iron Despard had not fired at his foe at all. He felt no personal hostility toward the Sportive Sport; on the contrary, he admired him, and fully justified the course he had pursued in tendering the challenge and seeking to avenge his wrong by taking the life of his wronger. He accepted the consequences of his own act by offering his body as a target to a man whom he believed to be a dead shot; but that was no reason why he should seek the life of one with whom he really had no quarrel.

"Will you please to ascertain whether the wound is mortal?" asked the Sportive Sport of Tiger Dick.

"I will."

The Sportive Sport ran up to his wife's chamber. She was still sleeping quietly. He left a kiss on her lips; and a few minutes later was in the saddle, ready to go to negotiate the exchange of a gold mine for a baby.

Tiger Dick made his way to his side.

"Well?"

"He is not dead. It is impossible to tell yet how severely he is wounded."

"Thank you!"

And he rode away.

At the appointed spot he found Joe Moran with the child in his possession, ready for the transfer.

"Boss," said the rascal, with a beaming smile of enthusiasm, "you done that handsome, an' no mistake! Oh! you bet I was whar I could see what was goin' on! I always calculate to look after my own affairs. Then I know when they air done on the square. Now, thar's no body at your heels—I know that. Don't you believe that I am takin' any chances whar my neck is at stake! Suppose you had tried to ring in a cold deal on me? You wouldn't 'a' found nuther me nor the young'un! An' now I look as if I was alone, don't I? Waal, jest equint around ye."

He merely snapped his fingers, and all around the little glade in which they stood, rose a band of masked men, armed to the teeth.

Moran grinned.

"Boss, you see what thar is in this thing. We mean business, an' we've got the sand to carry it out. Now, I'd like to make you a leetle proposition. Your'e a man to my likin'; an' I'm free to say what I think. What do you say to joinin' us? I'll make you second in command. How's that fur an offer?"

"It does very well as an offer—which I beg to decline."

"Spoken like a man! An' I always like a man to say what he means an' means what he says. Now I suppose that you have no notion of takin' sides ag'in' us any further in this matter?"

"You need no assurance of that. I have my wife to look after; and aside from the complications of this case, it is not likely that I would keep her in such a place as one of these rough mining-camps, nor, while she is so dependent upon me, that I will engage in any enterprise of unnecessary hazard."

"Waal, sir, I am glad to hear ye talk so sensible. It's a pity we hain't more married men o' your way o' thinking in this part o' the country. We'd begin to flank our gin shops with churches an' jails, ef we had. Queer, ain't it, that them two institutions goes together? But you've got yer kid, an' I've got my docki-

ment; so I reckon we kin wish each other good luck an' good-by!"

With this parting the Sportive Sport was allowed to go his way.

The child had been narcotized to still its crying; but the effects of the drugs had nearly worn off, so that it woke, and recognizing its father, nestled in his arms and crowed. Who shall describe the tenderness with which he gathered it to his heart, or the impatience with which he urged his way back to the mother?

Never baby received a greater ovation than did this one on its entry into Mulligan's Bend.

"Hush! hush!" cried the Sportive Sport, his delighted smile showing that his reproof was not unkindly. "Do you think that I want the mother awakened by your—excuse me if I say it!—unmusical voices?"

"Thunder an' Mars! that's what I call drawin' mild!" cried one. "Now, I'd put it—shet up yer saw-mills!"

"Wait until I signal you from the window," said the Sportive Sport; "and then you may make such demonstration as your good-will prompts; and I will thank you for it, for both myself and wife."

He ran up stairs. Mrs. Haveland yet slept. Carefully he drew down the coverlet, and placed the infant within the circle of her arm, with its face against her breast.

As the little one nestled contentedly, the mother unconsciously closed her arm about it. Then the happy husband and father bent over her and kissed her lips, calling softly:

"Stella!"

The mother opened her eyes with a start. Then followed a glad cry, and—

The crowd outside saw the Sportive Sport open the window and wave his hat. Then they cracked the welkin with their hurrahs.

In the midst of this rejoicing a boy rode into Mulligan's Bend in quest of Edward Haveland. On being summoned, the Sportive Sport received a telegram which had been sent as far as Denver by wire, and thence by courier, so urgent was the message it bore.

It read:

"Corner broke. All in it ruined. You are million and quarter ahead. Opportunity of lifetime. Advise me what to do. JASPER HAVELAND."

It is needless to say that this announcement caused the Sportive Sport some excitement. His first impulse was to indite a reply on the spot, giving his uncle discretionary powers; but on second thought he ran up to his wife.

"Stella," he said, "my last venture seems to have turned out quite different from what everything indicated when I left New York. Instead of being ruined, as I supposed, we are worth a million and a quarter. See! here is a telegram from uncle. What reply shall I send him?"

The wife flushed and paled, glanced rapidly through the telegram, and then lifted her eyes wistfully to her husband's face.

"Well?" he asked.

"Would it be a great sacrifice to you, dear, to give up that life?" she ventured, very gently. "Why?" he asked, before committing himself.

"Because— I have been thinking about it all the way out here—making up for my past heedlessness!" she added, with a faint smile. "And it seems to me that the feverish excitement is not healthful. Besides, I have a grudge against it. It is the first and only thing that has ever come between us!"

Hanging with her arms about his neck, and with her head thrown back, she gazed up into his fond eyes with a merry twinkle in her own, as she added:

"We've got money enough, Ned. Now, in the words of the great general: 'Let us have peace!'"

She pursed up her lips with the coaxing smile with which she always won him over to her wish; and he accepted the tempting invitation with all that it implied.

Giving her his note-book and pencil, he said:

"Answer to suit yourself."

She took the pencil, and leaning the book against his arm, wrote in dainty script:

"Keep out! We start East immediately."

"There!" she laughed. "Is that technical?"

"If brevity and point count for anything, you will certainly be Minister of State when women get their rights!"

A moment later the courier was on his way back to flash this reply across the continent.

While the Sportive Sport and his wife were preparing to take their departure by the coach, which would leave the Bend in an hour, word was brought by Six-foot Si that Bob Cady "had jest passed in his chips."

"I will make his sweetheart and her family my care," said the Sportive Sport; "and whatever money can do to repair her loss shall be done."

Later he learned that he had nothing to reproach himself for in the matter of the cryptogram; for all of that country was swept as with a besom of fire by the Indians; and Joe Moran was among the victims—the precious cipher being lost with him.

When the coach rolled out of Mulligan's Bend with the reunited family, it was sped on its way

with such rousing cheers as a western crowd knows how to give when it is in a particularly hearty mood.

But in the midst of this demonstration a horseman dashed into the camp on a foam-flecked and limping beast. He had lost his hat, his face was scratched by branches through which he had brushed, and his usually neat dress was in sad disorder.

The rider was Shadow Jim.

Seeking out Tiger Dick, he whispered a few rapid words into his ear, and then rode away as abruptly as he had come.

Before midnight he was restored to the embraces of his Maule, who, while she bemoaned the abrasions on his—to her, at least—handsome face, assured him again and again that she would never—no never doubt him more! He magnanimously forgave the past; and they agreed never to speak of it again. Nevertheless, whenever thereafter the waters of their domestic sea were troubled, she was very apt to drag the skeleton of the Golden Serpent to the light, with many tears and profound despair.

An hour after Shadow Jim's flying visit to Mulligan's Bend, Detective Farnsworth made his appearance; but the bird had flown. He received apparently frank answers from those of whom he made inquiry; but if they had been Chinamen, they could not have professed more dense ignorance as to the Tiger's movements.

Adam Farley was greatly chagrined at the miscarriage of his "little game," but the Golden Serpent assured him that she believed that he had done all that was possible; and that she was satisfied.

The stage that took the Sportive Sport and his wife to Denver, on their way East, passed one containing a lady closely veiled. She was attended by a man who was very pale; as from loss of blood.

Reaching Coyote, they heard of the duel, at which the lady became so agitated that it seemed as if she were about to faint. She recovered herself, however, and urged her companion to hasten their journey to Mulligan's Bend.

Arrived there, a few inquiries brought Six-foot Si "to the fore."

After a brief interview, in which he was plied with questions and given information at a rate which, as he afterward said, "made his head swim," he came forth looking greatly bewildered.

He went to his shanty, where Iron Despard lay in the bunk from which the dead Bob Cady had been removed for his accommodation.

Iron Despard lay with his eyes wide open, but with a dull, stony look of utter indifference to life on his face.

"Pard," said Six-foot Si, sitting down beside him, "I've got a yarn to spin ye, not countin' that Doc said as how it wouldn't do ye no manner o' good to talk none. But allowin' that doctors' physic ain't the best physic in the world, I'm calculatin' to have my say. All I ask is that ye keep yer shirt on till I git through; an' then you kin take the floor."

"We'll begin by allowin' that thar's nothin' in this hyar world o' trial an' tribulation so doggone onartain as a dead sure thing. Thar's long-headed galoots afore your day ur mine as has sot that down!"

"Waal, the most curiousest case o' that kind that I ever dropped onto happened to a friend o' mine. He was a married man, with a wife that any man ought to be proud of. But jealous! He was the most gush hangedest jealous galoot you 'most ever see! Waal, he went home one night, an' he found a man with his wife; an' what does he do but pepper—"

"What do you mean?" thundered Iron Despard, leaping to a sitting posture, his hands clinched and his eyes blazing lurid fires.

"I mean that you shot your wife's brother; an' they're both hyar to prove it!" replied Six-foot Si, gazing straight into his eyes.

A deathlike pallor overspread Iron Despard's face; the fires of rage slowly died out of his eyes, and his tense muscles relaxed.

Suddenly Six-foot Si sprang forward, threw his arm about him, and eased him back on the pillow, where he lay completely exhausted, but conscious.

"It's all right, old man!" said Si, with a ring of sympathetic joy in his voice. "Jest you wait a second!"

He slipped out of the door.

So quickly that the other must have been waiting just without the threshold, it opened again, and the veiled lady glided in.

As she moved swiftly across the room to the side of the bunk, she lifted the veil. Their eyes met. Then with a sob she sunk down on her knees, and buried her face in the bed-clothes.

Weakly he reached forth his hand, and his fingers strayed over her luxuriant hair.

"Despard! dear, dear Despard! you will live—for my sake! I can't—oh! I can't lose you now!" she whispered, lifting her head, and gazing at him with clasped hands and her whole soul going out to him through her streaming eyes.

"I would come back from the grave to you!" he breathed, so faintly that she could just make out the precious words—"if—if you can for—"

But with a gurgle of rapture she clasped his head in her arms, and dropped her face upon his; and they were lip to lip and soul to soul once more!

THE END.

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